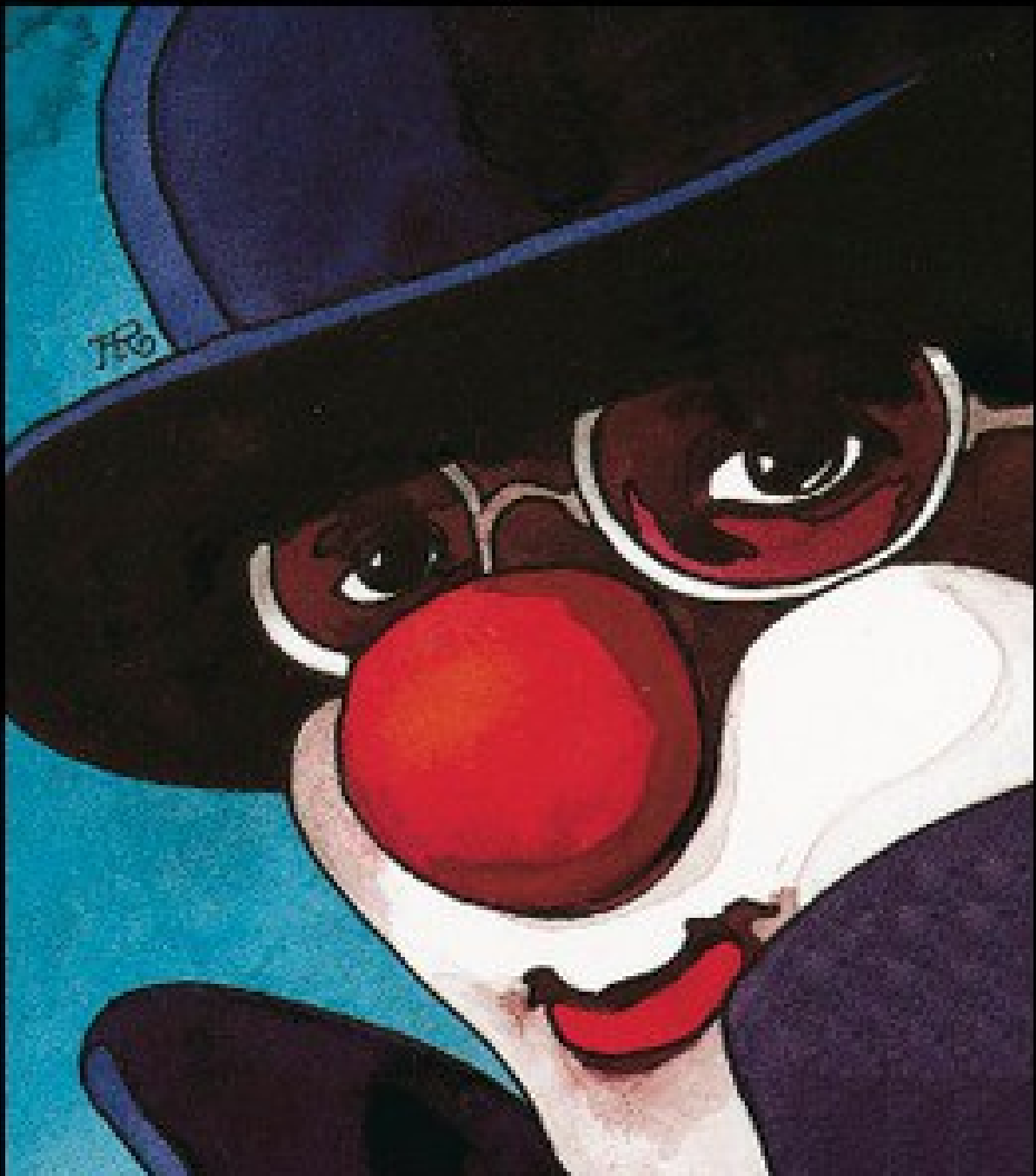


THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE CASE OF THE CRIME SCENE CIRCUS





in

**THE CASE OF THE
CRIME SCENE CIRCUS**

There is panic at the circus! The young artist Mary di Domenico falls from the tightrope during an evening performance. For Jupiter, Pete and Bob, one thing is certain: It wasn't an accident! After all, Mary is considered the heiress of a valuable collection of the famous clown, Jacky Knivel. The three junior detectives are ready to take over the case and they are faced with a mystery: Is their client really as innocent as she claims?

The Three Investigators
in

The Case of the
Crime Scene Circus

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(The Three ???: Crime Scene Circus)

by

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1. The Music Box

Pete couldn't believe his eyes. Jupiter was sitting on the floor of the old home trailer among countless files. "Wow! What's going on here?" he smirked.

"Don't grin like that," Jupiter replied. "You better help me."

"If you tell me what to do..." replied Pete. On the tips of his toes and with his arms outstretched, Pete balanced like a tightrope walker through the trailer to his friend. This is the trailer that The Three Investigators called Headquarters—one equipped with a lab, phone and all the other things you need in a detective's office.

"I'm organizing our archives. That means I'm trying to find some order so I can start organizing," Jupiter went to great lengths to make his voice sound as reproachful as possible. "It's been months since we've had viruses in our computers, and the corrupted data still cannot be recovered."

The Three Investigators had meticulously recorded all their cases for years. Then Jupiter discovered his passion for computers, and the records were stored there—until the accident with the computer virus happened. The bulk of the data had not survived the attack of the virus.

At the beginning of the holidays, Jupiter made a promise to his two friends to restore the system. And on this sunny Saturday of all days, he had begun to put the promise into action.

"Actually," Pete said slowly, "I really wanted to go to the beach—with you and Bob and Kelly and Elizabeth." He paused. "And Lys, of course." Jupiter only noticed now that Pete was wearing his new super-bright bermudas and the blue T-shirt with the emblem of the Santa Monica Track Club.

"But if you think this has to be now..." Pete knew that a refusal hardly had little meaning—not only because Jupiter could be very stubborn, but also because it was about the records of their detective agency. And he didn't want to be accused of anything. "But then we should call Bob," Pete suggested. Jupiter was already fishing for the phone.

A cheerful voice interrupted him. "Not necessary... What happened here?" Bob stood in the doorway and was just as amazed as Pete was before him.

"You don't really want to...?" Of course, Bob remembered in a flash the ambitious plans from the beginning of the holiday. "But not today, ladies and gentlemen, when the sun is shining!"

"It shone yesterday, too, and tomorrow it will shine all the more. It does that every summer here in California for 82 days." Jupiter wouldn't accept any excuses. Glumly, Bob went to the small desk and gave Pete a rebellious look. Then he sat down next to a pile of files.

Jupiter pinched his lower lip as always when he thought. "The first thing we have to do is to take stock. The computer registry is damaged, but we still have the folders. We have to recover the files as much as possible. For those that cannot be recovered, we have to re-enter the records—provided we find them."

"Shouldn't we first think about changing the whole system?" Bob asked. He didn't want to give up the dream of the beach so quickly.

“That’s right,” Jupiter agreed with him. “And I already have an idea. Maybe we could look at your dad’s newspaper records. What do you think?” Bob’s father was a journalist for a big newspaper in Los Angeles. This had often helped The Three Investigators in their research.

Even before Bob and Pete could answer, Aunt Mathilda stuck her head through the door of the trailer: “What are you doing here? Still at it?” The Three Investigators nodded silently.

“Then take a break. I have coffee and twelve pieces of cherry pie waiting for you.”

Bob finally gave up on the beach plan. He picked up the phone and told the girls. After all, Aunt Mathilda’s offer was not a bad alternative.

“Stop, stop! We must continue here,” Jupiter shouted with a stern expression. “We haven’t even started yet.”

“Are you sick, man?” Bob was stunned. “Your aunt’s giving you the best cherry pie on the Pacific coast, and you want to deal with old files?”

Now Jupiter had to laugh. Bob was right. The workload that had just befallen him had been unusually heavy. But he really didn’t have to overdo it. He frowned theatrically. “Cherry pie? It’s a wonderful coincidence.” He looked meaningfully at his two friends. “It is my fruit day today and so I’ll eat at least two pieces.”

They left Headquarters and followed Aunt Mathilda across the salvage yard. Piled around were used items such as timber, iron beams, window frames, gymnastic poles, bathtubs, washbasins, windows and many curiosities that Uncle Titus had collected over time at flea markets, other junk yards, and at countless auctions. The Jones Salvage Yard is the name of his company that has made a name for itself over the past decades with people in and around Rocky Beach who were looking for unusual things. “Our family business,” was what Aunt Mathilda raved about when a lucrative business was in hand; whereas “your junk yard,” was what she complained of when she was annoyed by Uncle Titus’s uninhibited desire to buy.

They entered the house across the street. “Wash your hands,” the aunt shouted to the boys who had already turned towards the bathroom.

“We can come up with this on our own,” joked Jupiter. “The kindergarten is behind us.”

“Good to know. Then you won’t break any dishes and I can remove the table cloth,” Aunt Mathilda gave back from the kitchen.

“One to nothing to her,” Pete hummed. “No one really needs to wonder why Jupiter is so quick-witted.”

The nephew grinned.

They went into the kitchen to get plates and cups. Aunt Mathilda passed them the milk, snacks, sugar bowl and the whipped cream. “Did you really think I’d be dragging hard-working men off to carry plates now?” They laughed and sat down at the table.

“Hello,” said Uncle Titus gently, looking at Bob and Pete. “We meet each other again.”

“Hello, Mr Jones,” Bob and Pete greet at almost the same time.

“Why aren’t you at the beach on such a beautiful day?” Uncle Titus asked. The two of them giggled silly and stabbed each other in the ribs.

“I don’t know. What’s so funny?” Jupiter snapped.

Bob quickly shoved a piece of pie at Juve to keep him happy. “We’re working on our computer records,” he said. “Juve wants us to recover and replace the destroyed data and fix the old case records.”

Uncle Titus shook his head so rigorously that his black moustache trembled. “Somehow it must be in the air...”

“What?” Jupiter was puzzled.

“The preoccupation with the past,” said Uncle Titus

“Oh, Titus,” Aunt Mathilda interjected, “Don’t make fun of me.”

“It’s all right, but you’ve been looking at old things all morning,” replied Titus.

“And you?” Aunt Mathilda retaliated. “You live off it, don’t you?”

“What’s it all about, if I may ask?” Jupiter joined in.

His aunt gave everyone another cup of coffee and began to tell the story: As a young girl she had fallen in love with a circus cyclist—very much in love. But her parents did not think the relationship was befitting, so nothing came of it. The circus cyclist in turn had a good friend who was already a very famous clown at that time and later he became world famous. His name was Jacky Knivel.

“I know him!” Pete shouted in between. “I’ve seen him on TV.”

“Shhh,” hissed Bob, who was listening eagerly.

Knivel and the cyclist had started collecting old circus items many years ago. Soon they had an extensive collection of all kinds of objects, from throwing knives, lassos, costumes and masks to music boxes and posters by famous artists of the past.

Gradually, the collection had considerable value. The cyclist had already died quite young some fifteen years ago and had bequeathed his part of the collection to Knivel—except for an old, valuable music box, which he had it sent to Aunt Mathilda earlier before his death.

“Great! Can we see it?” Jupiter asked.

“I don’t have it anymore,” his aunt replied. “I sent it to Knivel, on loan, so to speak. He unfortunately died a month ago. And yesterday a news report on television said that there was a huge quarrel among his heirs about the collection.”

“Do you want the music box back?” Bob sensed a field of activity for The Three Investigators.

“Not necessarily. I just want it to go to whom Knivel really wanted to give his collection to,” said Aunt Mathilda.

“I have an idea,” Jupiter cried, after eating a second piece of cherry pie inconspicuously. “We were going to ask Bob’s father if we could look at his news archives. Certainly there are newspaper clippings about Knivel’s collection and reports about the inheritance dispute. We’ll get them and then let you know if something came up. Provided, of course, you make cherry pie again,” he added as casually as possible.

“Only on your fruit day,” Aunt Mathilda quipped. “Take one more piece each and get out of here!”

2. The Inheritance Dispute

“It’s very simple,” Sam Bernstein said. Patiently, the computer expert explained to The Three Investigators the news archival system of the *Los Angeles Times*. He played with the mouse, clicked on some buttons, entered the search criteria and terms, to retrieve the results of the basketball games of the last weekend.

“With this program I can access all sorts of reports and articles from the computer systems of various newspapers. The names of the clubs, the venues and even the individual players can be retrieved.”

“That would be interesting for us, too.” Bob was all set. “Then we could link the information of individual cases.” His two friends nodded.

“Give me a name or something and I’ll show it to you again,” said Mr Bernstein.

“Jacky Knivel,” Jupiter said calmly and spelled out the name. Pete kicked him in the shin.

The clown’s name appeared on the screen, along with a list of article headings. “What do you want to know specifically about this person?” asked Mr Bernstein.

“All about his collection, for example,” Jupiter said.

Mr Bernstein entered the search criteria and some terms. The computer then displayed a list of 22 headings. Jupiter scanned the list in a flash. The last two entries were from last week, and in the column ‘Remarks’ was the word ‘Heritage’.

“Could you print these articles for us?” Jupiter asked pointed to the last two entries on the list.

Pete came to his rescue. “We’re circus fans, and we’re very interested in the Knivel collection.” The laser printer buzzed and shortly, several sheets of paper came out. The Three Investigators then thanked Mr Bernstein for the tutoring in archival work and the articles and took the glass elevator down to the ground floor.

“Would you like to work in such a cubby-hole?” Pete asked. “They don’t even have daylight.”

“But they do have the most advanced software,” Jupiter threw in.

“That’s not everything,” Pete replied. “What good is the best software if your job bores you?”

Bob was used to better things. He also worked in Sax Sendler’s talent development programme for up-and-coming musicians. Later he would want to open his own agency. It was his dream to discover and develop music talents.

They trotted down to Bob’s old Beetle and drove down Harbor Freeway.

As they passed the Music Center, Bob took a longing look at it and said: “I’d like to work there one day.”

“We know! As a top manager,” joked Jupiter.

“I’d rather go to one of the new skyscrapers where there are swimming pools and squash courts.” Pete quickly intervened to prevent a discussion about Bob’s career prospects.

Pete was the most athletic of The Three Investigators. He felt just as at home on the cinder track as he did on the tennis court. At school, he was the star of the basketball team and was therefore popular with many girls, especially Kelly and her cheerleading team.

The traffic was flooded at this time of the day, but they made good progress. Bob whistled the title song of 'Asphalt Cowboy', currently one of his favourite tunes. Meanwhile, Jupe and Pete delved into the newspaper articles.

Until his death over four weeks ago, Jacky Knivel had worked at the famous Winkler Bros Circus. Harry Winkler Jr., the company's current director, was in possession of a letter in which Knivel promised him the collection.

"Bah!" Pete interrupted his reading. "Do you know what all this old stuff is worth?"

"Could even be a good hundred thousand dollars! It's worth arguing about," suggested Jupiter.

A few days after Knivel's death, a will had appeared. In it, the famous clown did not mention Winkler, but a young tightrope artist, Mary di Domenico, who worked for Winkler. However, she had carelessly let her boss know that she had no idea how she got that honour.

"And now the Circus Director wants to contest the will, right?" Bob asked.

"It says here that Winkler and Knivel did not get along at all," Jupiter announced. "Knivel only stayed with the company because of the two circus founders—Harry's father and uncle."

"Perhaps this tightrope artist was a secret lover of Knivel," Pete thought.

"Typical of you, but unlikely given the age difference," Jupiter replied. "She's 23 and he was 79."

"Think of Charlie Chaplin." The Second Investigator didn't want to admit defeat. "And if not lover, maybe daughter."

Bob turned into the driveway of the Jones Salvage Yard. "What do we do now?" he asked Jupiter, who was looking out of the Beetle.

"Go through all the articles again," replied Jupiter.

"But we don't have to do it at Headquarters. We can also read on the beach," Pete suggested and danced like a boxer in front of them.

Jupiter pinched his lower lip. Actually, Pete was right. "Okay, in ten minutes," he commanded. "But without the girls, if you don't mind. You'll just be distracting yourselves from work."

Naturally, the girls went down to the beach with them. Not only Kelly and Elizabeth, but Lys de Kerk was also there. The young film actress had interrupted her career and made resolutions to go to college. Jupe admired the clever, tall blonde. And Lys liked Jupe. When she made the suggestion of going to the circus at six in the evening, the First Investigator thoughtlessly abandoned all plans to restore the computer archives of The Three Investigators.

Also a second reading of the newspaper reports in the afternoon had not helped the three friends. It was one word against another. On the one hand, the will weighed more than the letter. On the other hand, Knivel's letter to Winkler bore a more recent date, which was why the Circus Director claimed that the clown had changed his mind. Perhaps they could learn more about the inheritance dispute at the circus.

Jupiter stood in front of the mirror and tugged at his T-shirt, which stretched around his belly. "You've had enough already," Aunt Mathilda cried as she passed through the open doorway.

Jupiter sighed to himself. He should have eaten less cherry pie, less peanut butter and bananas, pretzel sticks, pizza and pickled cucumbers, and drank less cola. "From tomorrow, only salad," he muttered and slipped quickly into a slightly bigger T-shirt.

3. The Circus Accident

Pete had picked up Bob in his MG and together they went to get Jupe. The three boys wanted to meet at the circus box office with the girls who had promised to get the tickets. “*Ciao*,” Jupe shouted to his aunt and uncle. He jumped into the car, and with squeaking tyres, Pete drove off.

“We’re late,” Jupiter said. The other two took a meaningful look at each other. Just a few months ago, Jupe had regularly been having problems keeping a rendezvous. His saying of ‘work comes first’ was mostly justified, but Pete and Bob often had difficulties explaining it to their girlfriends. Now, strangely enough, Jupiter himself was very keen to keep appointments to the minute.

“We’ll be sure to get there in time,” Pete calmed him down and shifted to the next gear. He drove through the streets of Rocky Beach down to the coast to the large free area where the circus tent was set up. They reached just in time.

As agreed, the girls got the tickets and stood at the colourfully-lit circus entrance.

“Come quick,” Kelly shouted to them, “so we can still get good seats.”

Lys looked great in a glittering blue catsuit. In a hurry, no one could tell that Jupe had blushed at the sight of her.

They entered the large tent, where three rings were placed next to each other. It was loud and hot. Clowns jumped around and threw confetti. Ballerinas in tulle skirts with angel wings on their backs painted red hearts on the cheeks of little children. By chance, the six still got their places directly opposite the main ring.

Jupiter almost got himself a bag of popcorn as he passed by. “Just salad,” he shove it through his head, and he slid his hands in his pockets.

Then the band began to play. A loud announcement signalled the start of the performance. The heavy green curtain opened. Laughing and waving, the performers moved in. There were little people, some artists on stilts several metres high, four women in snake costumes, two muscular athletes with greased, golden skin, a lady dressed in white with a riding crop and many others.

“Which one is Mary di Domenico?” Bob asked and reminded Jupiter that he wasn’t just there to sit next to Lys and enjoy himself.

“Who’s that?” Kelly asked and looked at Pete hard. “A new girlfriend?”

“No, no,” Jupiter appeased. “She’s a tightrope artist who may soon be a rich woman.”

Kelly was by no means satisfied, but was distracted by the arrival of four elephants. With them came a man in a tailcoat—Circus Director Harry Winkler, Jr. He was easy to see from her seat. He was tall, well-built and actually looked very nice, apart from a crooked nose.

While the elephants showed their dressage in the main ring, the other two rings were also filled up. In one the four snake women appeared and the other, three Lilliputians, who produced gigantic soap bubbles that got all the children excited. The snake women with their acrobatic contortions were followed by a poodle act.

Jupiter wasn’t too enthusiastic about animal acts. “I’ll get us a programme booklet,” he said quietly to Lys and stood up without waiting for her answer. He didn’t fight his way through the crowd very skilfully as he searched for one of those girls in green uniforms who

gave out the programme booklets at the tent entrances. Along the way, he also saw many popcorn sellers and girls selling ice cream, but no one with the programme booklets.

He strolled along the edge of the great ring towards the curtain. Again the band played music, and the elephants trotted to much applause.

They were replaced by six jugglers in the costumes of Venetian carnivalists. That, in turn, Jupiter wanted to see. He looked around impatiently and saw someone in green uniform disappearing behind the curtain. The First Investigator hurried after her and got behind the curtain. The programme vendor was not there. Instead, he saw a man with a naked upper body, who was tampering with a rope with a pair of pliers.

"What are you doing here?" asked a female voice behind him. "This area is off limits to visitors." Jupiter turned around in surprise and looked into the enchanting face of a small blonde woman.

"You... I'm looking for you," he stuttered. "I mean... I want to buy a programme booklet." She held out a booklet to him with a radiant smile, he paid and hurried back to his seat.

"Aren't they wonderful?" Lys said as Jupe squeezed back onto the bench next to her. "You'd have to be at the carnival in Venice and stroll through the old streets wearing a mask."

"And ride in the gondola," added Jupe.

Now the jugglers increased the number of clubs they hurled through the air. "30," the announcer said, and the audience said, "31... 32... 33... 34..."

"Everyone's working on six clubs at once right now!" Elizabeth was thrilled. "Isn't that great?" The artists in the other arenas had interrupted their performances so that the audience could concentrate on the jugglers.

"I'll try that on the beach tomorrow," Pete announced. He thought he was capable of doing it, not six clubs at a time, but with three, he might make it. The six men hurled clubs, balls and rings through the whole tent once more. Then, after many bowing and cheering from the audience, they left the ring.

"What's this girl's name again that you know," Lys asked as she looked through the programme booklet.

"We don't even know her," Bob said, "but we do know her name is Mary di Domenico."

"Guess what? She's coming up next," Lys said.

The band played another tune. The three rings were again filled with some clowns, two muscle men and in the main ring, appeared a black-haired woman with a companion. She looked like the title character from Swan Lake. White feathers bobbed on her tulle skirt. She wore two small white umbrellas in her hair, which was done up in a knot at the nape of her neck.

From the circus dome, a long steel cable with a snap hook was lowered, to which Mary's companion graciously fastened to a wire rope. Then he let himself be pulled up close to the tent roof and he attached the rope to a platform just below the circus dome. At the same time, another helper anchored it at the bottom of the ring. "Mary di Domenico," the spokesman announced, "the prima ballerina on the rope!"

"I wouldn't go up there for money," Elizabeth said shuddering, looking up to the tent roof. The artist bowed gracefully, took two ballet steps and danced on her toes to the edge of the ring. She hopped on the rope, bowed again and slowly walked up.

Now Jupiter also looked up to the high platform that Mary had to reach and where her partner stood. He was focussing at Mary's partner when suddenly, he noticed Mary falling down from the rope. This was followed by several screams among the spectators. The dancer

laid motionless on the ground. Jupe didn't notice that Lys had clawed his arm. The spectators continued to scream and shout in confusion.

From one second to the next, all the cheerfulness was wiped out. Helpers ran in with a stretcher, followed by a man in a white coat, the Circus Director and some employees.

Everyone looked down, nobody looked up, except Jupiter. Now he knew where he had seen Mary's partner before—behind the curtain, with a big pair of pliers!

Jupiter then saw the man let himself down on a rope to the ground and went straight to his partner. After a brief commotion, Mary di Domenico was taken out of the ring on the stretcher. Harry Winkler then tried to cover up the accident with an announcement: "Don't worry, ladies and gentlemen, nothing bad has happened. The show goes on!"

"I've lost interest in the show," Lys whispered to Jupiter.

"Let's go to the café booth," the First Investigator decided without hesitation. After telling the four to look for them at the café booth, Jupiter and Lys went out.

Jupe didn't mind being alone with Lys. He also had to learn more about Mary and her partner. They walked out of the tent, past some booths selling T-shirts, glasses and ashtrays with the circus emblem, and followed a big golden arrow with fancy letters 'Café'. Despite the excitement, Jupe's stomach signalled hunger. They sat down at a small round table.

Some of the workers were sitting at the small round tables as well. The men looked up and gave Lys admiring glances.

Jupiter went to the counter, ordered chocolate cake and sweet pretzels with total disregard for his diet, and got two cups of coffee. Then he then brought the food to Lys. She looked pale and mindlessly flipped through the programme booklet.

"I've lost all mood. Imaging what it's like dropping from this height to the ground," Lys said.

Jupiter also thought of the injured artist. And especially because the accident might not have been an accident at all. "This has never happened before," grumbled one of the workers at the next table. "With some jumps, yes, but not this high up."

"Mary is very well trained," the woman behind the cake counter interfered in the conversation. "But maybe she suddenly got sick?"

The door opened, and one of the jugglers, still in costume, came in. "The doctor says she's getting away with some broken bones and severe bruises. Still have to check for internal injuries," he reported. "She's going to the Cedars Sinai Medical Center. Three or four weeks. They won't let her out before that."

"Can you get us another coffee?" Lys asked. She was starting to recover. "And maybe two pieces of chocolate cake."

"Cake for you." Jupiter pretended to be heroic. "I finally have to do something for my figure." He came back with two cups of coffee and one piece of chocolate cake.

"Honestly," Lys laughed at him, "I don't like these slim everyday guys very much. You don't exactly look like a body builder, that's true, but you've got something great in your brain." Jupe blushed.

More spectators entered the café. It was the performance break.

"There you are," Pete shouted. Behind him, Kelly, Elizabeth and Bob stormed in to café booth. That instance, Jupiter wished that his friends were on a different planet. He would have loved to have kept listening to Lys. Maybe she had some more nice things to say about him.

"Hey, Jupe, I asked you a question." Bob was standing at the counter. "I asked you if you had a piece of..."

"No," the First Investigator interrupted gruffly. "I'm eating salad."

“Baby Fatso goes among the rabbits,” teased Kelly. “The final diet.” She bit heartily into her cake, ignoring the tongue that Jupe ungallantly stretched out.

Jupiter Jones used to be a child star on television, and he did not hesitate to remember that. But his character name ‘Baby Fatso’ annoyed him to this day. He quickly changed the subject.

“Did you hear anything new about Mary inside?” Jupiter asked.

“She should not have been hurt too much. At least that’s what the audience has been told,” Pete replied. “I hope it’s true.” He bent over to Jupiter and asked quietly: “Has anything happened here?”

“Nothing important—except that such a misfortune has never happened before,” replied Jupiter.

“Will you come back after the break?” Elizabeth asked. Jupiter would rather have stayed alone in the café booth with Lys. He looked at Lys a little unsure and wondered if he should ask her.

“Are we going?” Lys beat him to it.

Too bad, Jupiter thought. “Coming.” He was so easy about it. “I’ll pay and catch up.”

“But don’t eat cake secretly.” That was Kelly’s revenge to Jupiter for sticking out his tongue.

“Cake. I don’t even know how to spell it anymore,” Jupiter said as the rest was going back to the performance.

Before getting up, he saw the programme booklet that Lys had left behind. He sat back down and flip the booklet until he found information about Mary’s performance. Her partner’s name was Walter de Maria. There was a photo in the booklet that showed him wearing the same costume as today and as when Jupiter saw him behind the curtain.

The First Investigator tried to recall what Walter was doing. He was not familiar with circus tightropes, but he supposed that it was customary to check the rope and the tension before each performance. Jupiter then turned to the workers and asked: “Has the young woman who fell today been with her partner long?”

“Long enough.” The workers looked at him suspiciously. Jupiter was annoyed that he can’t get a clear answer. He then didn’t want to ask any questions about possible manipulations to a wire rope using a pair of pliers. He stood up, paid and followed the others back into the circus tent.

Discouraged, Jupiter trotted across the salvage yard to Headquarters. The further course of yesterday evening had not been a particular success. Lys, obviously shaken by the accident at the circus, had barely spoken to him even though Jupe was so fond of the actress. Bob and Pete did not help either, instead they frequently teased Jupe by asking stupid questions.

Headquarters was still stacked with files. Jupiter looked at the mess and thought that at that moment, it didn’t look like The Three Investigators needed their archives. In addition, he also wanted to get a new virus removal and computer restoration software and try it out. But where to put the files? He pinched his lower lip. If he stacked them back into the cupboard, the shelves would have to be strengthened, else they would break.

The trailer was very well equipped with all kinds of technical equipment, a small laboratory and a darkroom. However, there was no room for office supplies, magazines and books.

Jupiter worked on his lower lip again. “The tunnel! That’s an idea!” Under the salvage yard, a tunnel led from the trailer to a hidden exit. They had built the secret passage

themselves with the help of old corrugated iron pipes and lined it comfortably with pieces of carpet. In the past, the three of them had made a run for it this way if they wanted to escape Aunt Mathilda unnoticed. In the meantime, the tunnel had lost its purpose. After all, they had grown older and were no longer afraid of Jupiter's resolute aunt.

Jupiter cleared away some files and tugged at the latch of the trap-door. One by one, he pushed the files into it. They were safe there for now. And they won't bother anyone.

Not a minute after he had closed the trap-door, Bob and Pete were standing at the trailer door. Jupe wiped the sweat off his face and beamed. His bad mood had gone, although he did not like the physical effort he put in.

The two friends looked around the small office in a stupefied way. "You belong to the circus," Bob said, "as a file-vanishing magician."

"Unfortunately, not forever. Sometime in the not too distant future, we have to restore back our computer records. You know that," said the First Investigator sternly. "But for now, the files rest well." He laughed and stomped his foot on the trap-door.

"... In one of our old secret passages." Pete hit him on the shoulder. "Great idea!"

Jupiter leaned against the small desk, talked about his observation yesterday and looked curiously at the other two. "And?" he asked stretched. "What do you think? Accident or attack?"

Bob and Pete shrugged their shoulders. "Hard to say," replied the Second Investigator. "But actually, it's a strange coincidence that her partner's been tampering with the rope a little while before the performance."

"Unfortunately, we can't prove it," Jupiter said. "We must now think very carefully about how to proceed. The only sure thing is we need more material on Knivel and his collection."

"I have to go to the newspaper office anyway," Bob interrupted him. "If you want, I can look in the archives again."

"And you, Pete," Jupiter suggested, "You could go on a sick visit. I have checked with the hospital that Mary di Domenico may receive visitors. She has broken two ribs and a leg, a dislocated shoulder and many bruises, but otherwise she's fine. Apparently, her guardian angel was with her. Best you buy a bunch of flowers and try to find out more about her and her background."

"Hopefully Kelly won't run into me," Pete groaned, "or else who knows what she'll think."

"We should also learn more about Knivel's death and other circus incidents," Jupiter said.

"Shouldn't we check with Chief Reynolds?" Bob said.

"Chief Reynolds is currently in Boston on business," Jupe replied. "Uncle Titus met him last week. I'll call Inspector Cotta instead."

The Three Investigators often worked together with the Rocky Beach Police, in particular Chief Reynolds and more recently, Inspector Cotta. In many of their past cases, they had provided the police with important evidences or information for solving crimes. Chief Reynolds was often pleased with their contributions that he had even designated them as 'Volunteer Junior Assistant Deputies'.

Pete looked at the clock. "And when shall we meet again?"

"Four o'clock." Jupiter grinned at them. "But not here, on the beach. Of course, only if you don't mind."

"Finally you have understood that you can combine work and leisure wonderfully." the Second Investigator didn't miss the opportunity to take a side blow. "We owe it all to Lys."

"Get out!" cried Jupiter. "If you don't, I'll change my mind."

Just a few months ago, Jupiter would not have thought of proposing a meeting on the beach. He had to think about Lys and how they had first met. He had been dazed then. And now he met her almost every day, as if it was nothing special.

Jupiter shook his head and looked at his two friends. He was confused about himself, even if he did not really want to admit it.

4. A Fairy Gives Some Information

Pete drove towards the hospital on Beverly Boulevard and sang to himself happily. He had bought yellow roses for ten dollars and was looking forward to meeting Mary di Domenico. Confident as he was, he never doubted for a moment that the artist would also be happy with his visit.

He turned into the large parking lot in front of the Medical Center and parked his MG. He jumped out of the car, grabbed the bouquet and headed for the entrance.

Behind a glass wall was an attendant in a light blue coat. "Hello," said Pete kindly, "I'm sure you can tell me where I can find Mary di Domenico, the artist who was admitted last night."

"Mary di Domenico," the attendant murmured and fingered on the list of names. "There is no Mary di Domenico on my list. However, a Mary Jo Berger was admitted last night."

"Hmm," Pete thought out loud. "Yeah, perhaps that's her real name."

"Station K, fifth floor. Ask for the ward nurse," the attendant replied.

"Thanks!" Pete said as he made his way pass the attendant. "Hmm... Mary Jo Berger," he thought. "No harm trying. Anyway, I'd recognize Mary."

On the way to the elevator, the unpleasant hospital smell got to Pete's nose. He would have to involuntarily think of his tonsillectomy. The only pleasing thing had been the mountains of ice cream he'd gotten for pain relief.

The elevator stopped at the fifth floor. Pete entered the hallway and searched for the ward nurse. Surely it was an older woman, and his charm always had a special effect on older women. At least Kelly had claimed that if she wanted to annoy him. He knocked on the door of the nurses' room. "Hello, I'm Pete Crenshaw." There was a nurse at a desk with the back to him. "I'd like to visit Miss Mary di Domenico," he asked.

"Miss Berger you mean? Are you related to her?" The nurse turned around.

No way it was an old woman! A breathtakingly pretty dark-haired girl with black hair stuck on her back faced Pete. Since his tonsil surgery, the hospital had apparently changed a lot. "No, I am an admirer of her," Pete replied perplexed. "Uh... a fan, I meant to say."

"If she wants to see you, that's fine with me. Her room is Number 1103." She turned around again and ignored Pete.

He went across the hall and knocked. "Come in," he heard a voice reply. He brush his reddish-brown hair, opened the door and entered.

The room was small and bright. The patient laid in a high bed with the headboard up. Pete recognized her—it was Mary di Domenico. With her long black hair, the blue, tender face, she reminded him of a fairy. At least that's how he had imagined her before. However, the impression was destroyed by a huge bruise stretching from the chin to the left ear.

"Hello! I'm Pete Crenshaw."

"Yes?" She looked at him questioningly.

"I was at the show yesterday, and now, I wanted to..." Pete felt that he blushed. That hadn't happened to him for a long time. He was happy that Bob and Jupe couldn't see him now.

"You wanted," the artist repeated amused, "to bring me the bouquet, right?"

Pete had caught himself again and put on his sunniest smile. He gallantly presented the flowers to Mary di Domenico.

"There's a vase over there," she said.

Somewhat carelessly, he put the roses into the vase and then pulled up a chair. "May I?" he asked with a suggested bow and sat down without waiting for an answer.

"I was terrified when you fell off the rope yesterday," he started the conversation.

"Well, me too," she replied.

Pete looked at her surprised. The fairy gave pretty dry answers.

"But I did, thank goodness, get away with one black eye. Sort of." She pulled her face painfully.

"Yes, ah... that was really lucky. But I think you have a great job despite the risk and danger," Pete continued the role of the fan. "I have a wonderful idea of life at the circus."

"Yes, it is, but it's also hard and exhausting. And dangerous, as you can see," she said.

After some skilful questions, Pete learned her whole story: After the early death of her parents she had grown up in a boarding school and actually wanted to become a ballet dancer. Her talent, however, was not enough, as it turned out at an audition organized by the famous Joffrey Ballet Company. After that, she travelled around the country. She rattled through television studios and occasionally performed in dance shows until she met Jacky Knivel five years ago.

"He was wonderful and so understanding," she said. "He discovered my real talent and made me a worthy artist." Knivel trained with her for several months. She then worked for a small circus in the Midwest and a variety on the East Coast until she returned to California last fall.

"Do you know who's investigating your accident?" Pete asked carefully.

Mary di Domenico frowned. "What do you mean? What is to be investigated?"

"Well, technical flaws maybe. If there was anything on the rope, for example," replied Pete.

"Oh, I see. I'm sure my partner will." She shook her head involuntarily and groaned slightly. "I don't know either. I never thought anything like this would happen to me."

Pete was aware that he was now coming to a dangerous cliff. Actually, she must get suspicious, he thought. But he kept asking. "How long have you been working with a partner?"

"That was Winkler's idea. Walter's my first regular partner. Winkler wanted to unite strength and grace, as he said," replied Mary. Pete raised an eyebrow.

"He sometimes talks a little bit and is pretty taken on himself. He considers himself the P. T. Barnum of modern times."

The Second Investigator did not know exactly who this P. T. Barnum was, but of course he had better not ask. After all, he was supposed to be a big circus fan. He put on a connoisseur's face and nodded encouragingly at the artist. "Is it true what the newspapers write about you and Winkler?"

"Unfortunately," Mary di Domenico sighed. "We're having quite a fight over this stupid inheritance." She was sounded a bit furious. "I don't need the money, but Knivel wanted me to get the collection. I got it in black and white. And next week it will be mine." She had spoken the last sentence very loudly.

The door opened and the attractive ward nurse entered. "I didn't allow you to upset Miss Berger," she said strictly. "Besides, visiting hours are about to end."

"May I come back?" Pete asked quickly.

Without realizing it, he was smiling at Mary di Domenico. "If you have nothing better to do in this weather," she replied. Her voice was a little more indifferent than he liked. "I have to stay here at least two more weeks. A change can't hurt."

He got up. "What's going to happen next week?" he asked quickly.

"The probate hearing," Mary di Domenico replied.

Pete's further questions were prevented by an unmistakable hand movement of the ward nurse.

Jupiter and Bob would be satisfied, he grinned after the door behind him had closed. And with a next visit, he was sure he would learn more. He ran down the wide stairs, two steps at a time. "Too bad I can't tell Kelly what an impression I made on Mary di Domenico," Pete grinned on that performance again. Kelly was sometimes overly jealous.

With diving goggles and fins under his arm, Juve came up to Pete, who was coolly frigid in the sun. "Hey, Juve, do you know who P. T. Barnum is?" asked Pete.

"Phineas Taylor Barnum, 1810 to 1891," the First Investigator buzzed down the information mechanically like a telephone announcement service. "Agent, showman, showmaster and circus entrepreneur. Discoverer of Tom Thumb, the dancing Lilliputian and the Siamese twins, owner of 68 circus wagons and Jumbo, the first elephant born in a circus..."

"Stop, stop! That's enough! I'm deeply impressed, but please turn off your tape," Pete exclaimed.

"You asked, didn't you?" Jupiter spread his towel on the sand.

"Stop it!" Bob looked up from one of his beloved music magazines.

"There's no bickering here, whether bathing or working." Sometimes Bob's two friends got on his nerves with their constant bickering.

"Work can wait," Pete shouted and sprinted to the water.

"He's right." Bob put a stone on his magazine. "Come, Juve!"

Although the sun was already very low, the beach was still well visited. Some children played beach volleyball behind the low rocks where a net was stretched. At the snack bar, a bunch of hungry and thirsty beach-goers were munching away as usual.

While Bob and Peter were competing, Jupiter paddled leisurely on his back. He thought of Aunt Mathilda's music box, of the young artist and of Jacky Knivel, who, according to Inspector Cotta, had died of a completely unspectacular heart failure after a serious case of flu.

Maybe, he thought, they were just mistaken. Newspapers were puffing up the inheritance dispute, an artist had a bad day and fell off the tightrope. Jupiter shook his head, as far as paddling on the back was possible. "And we," he murmured to himself, "smell disaster again under the circus tent. The detective work spoils the character." He decided to rethink all further steps thoroughly.

"Hey!" Suddenly, Pete appeared next to him. "Are you dreaming? Bob, Kelly and Lys are calling their lungs out for you." He stretched the upper part of his body out of the water and looked at his friend provocatively. "Race you to the shore!" He elegantly threw himself forward but went under.

Pete was much more athletic than he was, but he had sometimes lost to Juve when swimming medium distances. "Because fat just swims well," the Second Investigator had expressed his opinion once before. Juve, who could take a lot of jokes about his size, had been really angry back then. They had not spoken to each other for several days. In secret, Juve

had toyed with the idea of continuing to work only with Bob. Just in time, Pete had apologized.

For the swim duel Jupe had started too late this time and therefore had no serious chance. But at least he was so close to Pete that Lys and Kelly stared admiringly at him.

"Do you have any other hidden talents?" Lys asked, laughing, throwing her long white hair, which she had braided into many small plaits, backwards with a swing. The wetness made her hair shimmer like silver in the sun.

He winked at her. "Who knows?" he said boldly.

"Come sit with us," Kelly asked the two swimmers.

"I'm afraid I can't," Pete beat the surprised Jupiter. "We must work, and we must work urgently. See you later."

Bob threw himself into the water with a Tarzan scream, and they swam draughtily to the south end of the bay where they had earlier put their bags and stuff. Then they dried off, and put on their T-shirts. There they were in seclusion.

Bob, the specialist for complicated research, took out a notebook and some documents from his gym bag. "Here's everything I could find from the archives," he said. "It's quite a lot. If you want, I'll sum up the most important things. Then you'll have an overview."

In his youth, Knivel had been friends not only with Aunt Mathilda's circus cyclist, but also with a young violinist who was a member of the circus band. Their romance remained a secret. It was only when the musician met a rich music publisher one day that it became known that Knivel had also courted her. But the gossip had only leaked out at the dream wedding between the beautiful musician and the successful publisher.

"I only found her links with the clown by chance," Bob proudly said. Immediately after the wedding, the new wife left the circus with the intention of making a career at concert halls around the world.

Pete interrupted him, moaning. "The heat is just unbearable. I need a drink urgently. Can I get you anything?"

"Two banana shakes," Bob replied.

"One banana shake," Jupiter corrected Bob. "Soda water for me."

"All due respect." Pete patted Jupiter on the shoulder and ran over to the little snack bar.

"And?" Jupiter asked impatiently. "What happened to the violinist?"

"She died in a swimming accident two years later," Bob continued. "The music publisher, named Jason Berger, withdrew completely from the public eye. I haven't found anything more about him. He's probably long dead, too."

Bob dug into his gym bag and pulled out some photos. "I still have a lot of information about the collection. Knivel had been collecting the most interesting and valuable pieces from America and Europe for over fifty years. Many museums have already taken an interest in his collection." Jupiter took the photos and browsed through them slowly.

"Wow! Look at that!" He held out one of the photos to Bob. "A mummy from a curiosity show. I'm sure she made a lot of money for her owner on the east coast in the last century."

Pete trotted in. He distributed the drinks and took a curious look at the photograph. "Yuck! Are we dealing with a corpse in this case?"

"The mummy was Knivel's," Bob replied. "She's one of the most famous pieces in his collection. I found a note in the archive that a museum in Paris offered Knivel over ten thousand dollars for it."

"Not bad." Jupiter pinched his lower lip. "Where's the collection now?"

"Stored in Knivel's house," said Bob. "When he was alive, there were even guided tours to his house. The house has been locked since his death, and his lawyer has the keys. That's

pretty much all I could figure out.”

“Thank you,” Jupiter said in business-like tone. “Excellent work.” He turned to Pete. “And how did it go with you?”

“Fine,” beamed the Second Investigator. He told them in detail about his visit to the artist. Of course he did not forget to mention that he could come back at any time.

Then Jupiter reported his conversation with Inspector Cotta. “I don’t have much news. There are two possibilities: Either Winkler is a fraud, or Knivel actually changed his mind at the last moment. The question arises, why? His relationship with the Circus Director was bad, actually, it was getting worse and worse. Then Mary’s name came up in the will. But we must not forget the letter.”

“Maybe the date’s fake,” Bob thought out loud.

“I’ve thought of that too. On the other hand, if Winkler wants to get involved in an inheritance dispute, the letter must therefore be legitimate,” said Jupiter.

“That’s what Mary says of the will,” Pete interrupted him. “‘I got it in black and white’, were her own words.”

The Three Investigators went round in circles and remained silent for some time until Jupiter said: “We can’t get Winkler’s letter at the moment. I suppose the original will is in court. Mary should have a copy of it in her caravan. We should take a look at it, and quickly, because we can only help her if we put her on priority one. Next Tuesday is the hearing.”

“When do we go?” Bob asked.

“The best would be tonight,” answered Pete, who had been stacking little stones into a cone, as he usually did.

“We meet at midnight. Then the last visitors of the evening performance would have left,” Jupiter suggested. “Do you agree?”

“Okay.” Pete was full of energy. “I’ll pick you up. Bring flashlights and our equipment cases.”

They packed their things. Jupiter looked stealthily over some distance away on the beach. Lys and Kelly were still there. “Shall we go in the water again?” he asked as casually as he could.

Bob winked at Pete behind Jupiter’s back. “No, we must rest for tonight.”

The First Investigator turned around in surprise, while Pete and Bob tried in vain to suppress their laughter. Juve’s expression did not bode well.

“Don’t get mad.” Bob gave him a friendly jostle.

Juve bounced back. “It’s all right,” he relented. He pulled his T-shirt over his head and grabbed his diving fins. “At least now I’m the fastest. You can do whatever you want.” He threw himself into the water, howling triumphantly.

“What do you think? He’s in love with Lys?” Pete asked.

“What do I know?” Bob didn’t want to indulge in speculation about Jupiter’s state of mind. “Are you in love with Kelly?”

Pete hesitated. “Well, actually, um...”

“You see. And just as clear is the matter between Lys and our dear Juve.”

5. The Night Operation

Pete was all green in the face. Then it turned yellow, then blue, red and green again.

“It’s really creepy here,” Bob said, pulling his shoulders together. He, too, changed colour in the glow of the neon sign every second. Apart from the writing “Circus,” which threw its light from high above the tent, the whole area was in the dark. No sound was heard. From time to time one of the animals moved. It sounded dull, almost unreal, because the cages were on the other side of the tent.

They had climbed over the low wooden fence that surrounded the area. They crept through the caravans parked next to each other, casting long, eerie shadows.

The mood among the three friends was not good. They made a mistake by not finding out where Mary’s caravan was. Jupiter was particularly annoyed about it, after all, he was a perfectionist, and had overlooked one detail. That had seldom happened to him. But Bob and Pete had a hunch: Two days ago, when they were walking to the café during the performance break, they saw a nurse coming out of one of the caravans, holding a small suitcase and a robe. They now guessed that that was Mary’s caravan.

“Now what? Where is it? You said you’d find it.” Jupe whispered annoyingly. Bob and Pete stared uncertainly into the darkness. The caravans all looked the same. They walked quietly towards the main entrance. On the dry meadow their footsteps were almost quiet.

“We’re taking the path from here to the café now,” Pete suggested quietly. “Then we can’t miss Mary’s caravan.” Jupiter shrugged his shoulders and let the Second Investigator go first. Bob, who carried the small black case with their equipment, followed behind Jupiter. Suddenly Pete raised his hand.

The other two stopped immediately. “Here on the left—that’s it,” Pete whispered. Jupiter looked around. He was still uncomfortable about how the whole operation was prepared. Carefully, he looked through one of the windows. The curtains were not closed. From the glow of the neon sign he saw an untouched bed.

He held out his thumb to Pete, who then tried to open the door. It was locked. Wordlessly, Bob put the case down and unlocked it. The light was inadequate, but Pete managed to fish out a lock pick. Gently, he put it in the keyhole. It wasn’t suitable so he tried with another pick. After three tries, he got the door opened. The three of them slipped into the caravan, and locked the door using the latch from the inside.

“Okay,” Jupiter took a deep breath. “Now all we have to do is find the will.” Slowly and carefully Pete closed the thick curtains on the small windows. Only then did he switch on his flashlight.

A small kitchen was built on one side. “Great! It even has a microwave,” Jupiter whispered, suppressing a feeling of hunger. In the middle was a small table fixed onto the floor. Opposite the kitchen there was a sleeping alcove, next to it an armchair made of cane, some small cabinets, and a small, neatly arranged desk.

Bob heard sounds from the outside. The trumpet of an elephant could be heard from afar. It sounded like a fanfare. Jupiter was still a little queasy. “If anyone sees us from outside, we’ll be in big trouble. So be careful!” he whispered. Nevertheless, he checked the desk using the light from the flashlight.

Bob wiped his damp hands on his trousers and said: "I'm going to search the kitchen."

Jupiter growled softly, but Pete chuckled a few times, inviting a punishing slap from the First Investigator. Pete quickly searched the cabinets. They worked systematically and almost noiselessly.

There was a photograph on the desk. Jupiter took it in his hand, held the flashlight on it and looked at it attentively. The man on the huge stilts was a young Knivel. He put the picture back and examined the drawers. None was locked. He flipped through some newspaper clippings, then a stack of letters. He found autograph cards and countless photos. At two compartments were books and some bills. No trace of the will.

"I might have gotten it wrong," whispered Pete, after he searched the cabinets and a petite dressing table. "Mary didn't give me the impression that she was hiding a will in the cabinet or under the mattress."

"There's nothing in the kitchen either," Bob said.

"So what now?" Pete asked helplessly.

Jupiter pinched his lower lip. "Where would someone like Mary hide this will?" He pointed his flashlight once more at Knivel's photo. He stared at it for seconds. Then he took it in his hand and with his fingers felt the back of the frame.

Bob saw what Jupe was doing and held his breath.

Jupiter opened the frame. An envelope was attached to the back of the picture with two adhesive strips. "Bull's-eye," he whispered contentedly. Pete whistled quietly through his teeth. Jupiter fished several sheets of paper out of the envelope.

Suddenly, Bob startled. "Did you hear that?"

"That was your elephant trumpeting again," Pete sniggered.

"Now, let's get to it," Jupiter handed Bob his flashlight. They looked at the sheets of paper together. The three pages were densely written. "It's a sworn copy of the will. The camera, please," Jupiter said. Bob thought it was like a surgeon asking for the scalpel.

At that very moment, they heard a rumble. Bob immediately turned off the flashlight. They barely dared to breathe and listened intently. But everything remained silent. "What now?" Bob whispered.

Pete carefully went to the window next to the door and opened a tiny gap in the curtains. A dark figure has just emerged outside.

"Maybe somebody's tampering with the caravan," Pete whispered.

Jupiter made a reassuring gesture, as earlier, they had the door locked from the inside. Nothing should happen to them. "Take it easy," he whispered back.

Bob held out the camera and pointed to the letter, but Jupiter shook his head. Taking a photo was now unthinkable, because of the flash. And, of course, they couldn't take the copy with them either. The First Investigator took about a minute to scan through the pages. He then carefully put them in the envelope and inserted it back into the picture frame.

Suddenly, they heard some tampering sounds on the door lock. All of a sudden, Pete felt cold.

"If he picks the lock and the door doesn't open, he'll immediately know that something's wrong," Bob whispered. Sweaty beads gathered on his forehead. Jupiter nodded. Everything was quiet again.

Bob tiptoed his way to the door. "He's gone," he whispered. Now there was nothing more from the circus animals, but there was something threatening about the absolute silence.

A few minutes passed. Then Jupiter took out a piece of paper and a pencil and began to write. A while later, he passed the note on. In the flickering light of the circus neon signs that fell through the curtain gap, Bob and Pete laboriously deciphered Jupe's message: 'Open

door cautiously. Pete checks situation. If OK, sprint off, we follow'. Bob took the black case in both hands and pressed it close to his chest so as to be able to run better. Jupiter carefully undid the latch.

A short shuffling noise was heard. Anyway, Pete thought, just get out of here. He opened the door slowly and stuck his head out to look around. There was nothing.

In the next moment, Pete ran off. Bob and Jupiter was about to follow when they suddenly froze. Out of the shadows of the caravan, a figure came out and started running after Pete!

Jupiter slammed the door from the inside and fastened the latch back. Bob grabbed him by the arm and pointed through the gap in the curtain towards the opposite caravan. A man stood in the shadow and seemed to stare.

"Down the middle," Bob commanded. He didn't bother to be quiet anymore. Hiding was pointless. Besides, they couldn't let Pete down. He unlatched the door and ripped it open, and both rushed out as fast as they could.

To be on the safe side, they ran quite a distance until Jupiter looked over his shoulder and realized that nobody was following them. Panting, they stopped. There was a fence up ahead. Jupiter thought he saw a shadow appear between the caravans again and started a new sprint. Almost at the same time, the two friends scrambled over the barrier.

"Final sprint to the edge of the forest!" gasped Jupiter. They had parked the car behind a small forest so that it would not accidentally catch someone's eye. Far behind Jupiter saw an enormously fat figure coming after them. Jupiter was amazed at how fast this guy could run. The pursuer suddenly stopped. Jupiter breathed a sigh of relief. Then he realized that Bob had disappeared.

6. Where's Bob?

Pumped out, Jupiter arrived at the car. "That was a close one," Pete gasped. "But we lost him."

"What does it mean by 'him'?" Jupiter let himself fall onto the bonnet and gasped for air. "There were at least two of them." He straightened up again. He'll have to do more for his condition, he thought for the umpteenth time.

"Where's Bob?" Jupiter asked.

Pete looked around. "I don't know. I thought he was with you." It sounded a little reproachful. "So what do we do now?"

"If they caught him, Bob would surely have screamed," Jupiter tried to calm himself down. "Or not."

They stood there and listened into the darkness. Pete was nervously running this hand through his hair. "We have to go back," he said.

"And get caught too?" Jupiter pinched his lower lip. "Maybe they're waiting for us somewhere. It could be a trap."

"Psst," Pete hissed in horror and threw himself behind his car. Jupiter also took cover quickly. Again, he was thinking that they should have stopped the operation. He was unhappy—especially with himself. Between the trees, a figure appeared: tall, blond and handsome.

"Bob!" Jupiter crawled out behind the MG. "So you did it! Even with the case," He slapped Bob on the shoulder and cheered. "How did you get away from them?"

"Who?" Bob looked at him gruffly.

"The pursuer, of course," Jupiter remarked.

"Oh, I see. I haven't seen him!" Bob replied.

Jupiter pulled his eyebrows together and shook his head. "Then where have you gone for so long? You've scared the daylight out of us."

Bob looked down. "I got... I have..." he stuttered. "Oh, I tripped over a root and lost one of my contact lenses." Pete and Jupiter couldn't help grinning. Bob had become vain and had replaced his glasses with contact lenses some time ago. Since then he was always looking for one of those transparent things.

"No way! We thought you were in the hands of unscrupulous criminals..." cried Pete. "... instead, you were crawling through the woods like a slow worm in the middle of the night." After all the excitement, Pete had to laugh.

"Very funny," growled Bob. "When you're done giggling, let us know so we can get out of here."

The Second Investigator poked him in his ribs. "Come on, we're just glad you're back... intact!" He had to laugh again. "But I think you can write off the contact lenses. Or should we go back there, all three of us, inconspicuously of course, and comb the whole area?"

"Come on." Now Bob smiled. He took the second lens out of his eye and stowed it in a small container. "But these things are slowly driving me nuts. My parents don't want to pay for them any more."

On the way back, they slowly recovered from the chase. Without saying much, Pete drove down the road to Rocky Beach. In the meantime the sky was starry. "And now what?"

he asked,

"I can't go to bed now anyway," Bob spoke up after a brief silence.

"Let's go to Headquarters," Jupiter suggested. "We'll take the sleeping bags and lie down in front of the trailer." They remained silent again until Pete had parked his car at the back of the salvage yard.

One after the other, they walked over to the high fence that was decorated with a painting of the great fire of San Francisco of 1906. In the foreground of the sea of flames was a small dog watching the burning. His eye was a hole with a knot in it. Jupiter pulled the knot out of the hole, put his finger into it and pushed a bolt back. Three of the panels swung to the side.

This was one of the many secret entrances they had built years ago when they were younger. They named this entrance 'Red Gate Rover', but in recent years, they only use it when they do not want to cross the whole salvage yard to get to Headquarters. It has gotten more difficult for them to use these secret entrances as they have become bigger, taller, and in Jupe's case, fatter.

Jupiter unlocked the trailer. Bob put the case in its place, and Pete went to the refrigerator. "Do you want ginger beer?" he asked. They nodded and sat down on the steps of the trailer. Pete took three glasses out of the cabinet. He poured the drinks and followed the others outside. Jupiter was resting this head on both hands.

Bob took a deep breath. His mood was also affected. "You're right. We were bad today—real bad. The operation almost went to pieces. We messed it up big time."

"Give me a break." Pete had got up.

"Okay, we made a mistake at the beginning. We should've found out where Mary's caravan was before. The search wasted unnecessary time. But it's got nothing to do with those guys. They found us anyway."

Jupiter made a throw-away gesture. "That's not the point. We have to decide what we want. A mistake like that just can't happen. It's a matter of principle, not just wasted time. We must be satisfied with ourselves after an attempt, and if we are not..." He was thinking of their approach earlier where he had wanted to consider every step very carefully. He then shook his head. "We didn't behave like professionals."

"At least now we know there's something to it," Bob said after a while. "The two figures must have been looking for the will."

Jupiter was startled and slapped his forehead with his hand. "The will! I'd completely forgotten about it!" He rushed into Headquarters and came back with a pencil and a piece of paper. "I remember pretty much the exact wording." He started taking notes with full concentration. His bad mood was blown away. Pete and Bob looked at him admiringly. They would have loved to have known what Jupe wrote, but they couldn't disturb him in those moments. So they watched him with excitement.

A little while later Jupiter raised his head. "You're bursting with curiosity."

"Go ahead," Pete told him. "Don't torture us further."

"So..." The First Investigator was in his element. "Knivel wrote in crisp and clear sentences, declaring Mary as his heir. The will was presented with a very noble letterhead, bearing some coat of arms on the upper right corner, and it was dated February 29th of this year." He looked up and continued after a short interruption. "Basically Mary gets everything, apart from a few annuities—which was for his former housekeeper, for his chauffeur and for someone I can't remember now. However, there are conditions: Mary must never sell the collection in parts and if she were to sell, it had to be to some listed facilities. The circus wasn't among them, by the way."

"You're great!" Bob cried. "What would we do without your super memory?"

Jupiter was also satisfied with himself. He had not been able to reproduce the will word for word, but he had been able to recall it meaningfully. He was safe there. All the tension of the day fell away from him. Now he felt how tired he was.

“Let’s talk about everything again tomorrow,” Jupiter said. “Let’s sleep on it first. There’s not much time left till sunrise anyway.”

Bob went into the trailer and threw them the rolled-up sleeping bags. They spread them out and slipped in immediately.

7. The Connection with Jason Berger

The forklift truck clattered and noisily dropped a pallet.

Jupiter started up. "What's going on?" He rubbed his eyes and took a few seconds to find out why he found himself in the middle of the salvage yard in bright daylight.

The forklift truck went past. "How did you get here?" Hans yelled. "Did the girls move you out?" The native Bavarian, together with his brother Konrad, has been working with Uncle Titus for many years.

Meanwhile Bob and Pete also stretched themselves. "It was a short night," said the Second Investigator. "And a very loving wake-up call."

Bob crawled out of his sleeping bag. "Can I take a shower in your house?" he asked Jupiter.

"Of course. Tell Aunt Mathilda. We'll be right there as well."

Pete and Jupe stood up, rolled up the sleeping bags and brought them into the trailer.

The operations at the salvage yard were already in full swing. Konrad loaded the small truck with scrap iron, Hans was still stacking pallets. And Uncle Titus had a sales talk with a tall older gentleman who was interested in some beautiful old ceramic pipes.

"Good morning," he shouted to the boys. "Aunt Mathilda's waiting for breakfast."

In the house, it smelled wonderfully of coffee and eggs. Jupe sighed. Today of all days he wanted to start a new method of healthy nutrition.

"The bathroom is free!" Bob sat down at the table. Less than three minutes later, Pete and Jupe came back.

"You three must be really hungry," Aunt Mathilda teased and handed them a pot of hot coffee. "Do you want some eggs?"

"Oh, yes." Pete looked at her radiantly. "It's gonna be a real luxury meal."

"Not for me. Thank you," Jupiter said bravely and reaped pitiful looks. "I'll put together my own breakfast." He looked up from the table and disappeared into the kitchen.

"Not another new diet?" Bob whispered to the Second Investigator. "He's always wanting to stop fooling around and start a really healthy diet."

Jupiter came back with a bowl of grains, a bottle of milk, an apple and an orange.

"Aha," said Pete. "Get slim with cornflakes in a week."

"Not cornflakes. They make you fat," Jupe snapped back. "This is muesli."

"What?" Bob asked.

"Muesli. M-u-e-s-l-i," spelled Jupiter. "It was created by a Swiss man. It's the healthiest way to have breakfast." He cut the apple into little pieces.

"Sounds more like a new baby toy," Pete quipped.

"You're typical Americans, you don't know what you're talking about." Jupiter took a courageous look in the bowl. "These are different grains. They're mixed with fruit and milk. Who wants to taste?" Bob and Pete remained sceptical. Jupiter tried the first spoon.

"Delicious! Really delicious!"

"How did you get those grains?" Aunt Mathilda said as she gave Bob and Pete their scrambled eggs.

Jupiter blushed. "I was made aware of that," he said stiffly.

Pete took a look at Bob. "Who made you aware of that?" the Second Investigator asked lurking.

"It was Lys, if you really want to know," Jupiter replied. "Even the box in the kitchen is hers. Any more questions?"

Aunt Mathilda beat them both to it. "No. I think it's good that you're no longer stuffing yourself with peanut butter and bananas and pretending to lose weight. And so we end the subject." Bob and Pete were guilty and pulled their heads in.

Aunt Mathilda brought herself a cup of coffee, tried a spoon of Jupe's muesli and looked curiously at the three friends. "Why did you spend the night outside?"

"We were out and then came home late. We were pretty psyched," Jupiter replied evasively. He took a quick look at his aunt. "By the way, it was about your music box." The other two looked at him surprised. It wasn't like Jupiter to reveal details during an ongoing investigation.

"Are you still interested in getting it into the right hands?" Aunt Mathilda asked.

"Yes! And there is more to that..." Pete intervened. "There was an accident at the circus. It was in the papers. The tightrope artist in the inheritance dispute fell down during her performance. But she's not hurt too badly." He put on an important face. "I went to the hospital to see her."

"Indeed, and?" asked Aunt Mathilda.

"She's pretty nice, but she has no idea why Knivel appointed her as his heir," Pete said.

Bob took another helping of scrambled eggs. "May I ask you a question, Mrs Jones? Do you know anything about a romance between Knivel and a young musician, say about 40 years ago?"

Aunt Mathilda held her chin in her hand and thought. "Hmm. I haven't been here then," she said after a while. "I used to work in an office in Phoenix. I don't know..." She frowned. "I can vaguely remember... but I think that there was something about a musician from the band and a rich guy."

"Right," Bob interrupted her eagerly. "Maybe you can think of something? She played the violin in the circus band and is said to have been pretty good. And at some point, this Jason Berger ran into her, and then she..."

"Wait a minute! Who?" Pete interrupted. "What's his name?"

"Jason Berger. I already told you at the beach," Bob replied. Aunt Mathilda shrugged her shoulders.

Pete then knocked on the table frantically with his hand. "Do you know what Mary di Domenico's real name is?" he asked. He enjoyed the little exciting break. "No? It's Mary Jo Berger."

Jupiter was speechless, which didn't happen very often.

"Great!" Bob yelled. "But why didn't you say that yesterday on the beach?" Pete lifted his eyebrows.

The First Investigator tapped his forehead. "Sure, 'cause he left us for a while, remember? He got us the drinks, didn't he?" He was already working on his lower lip again.

"Now this story has just got interesting." He got up abruptly and brought his dishes into the kitchen without being asked. Bob and Pete followed him.

"Go ahead, I'll do the dishes," Aunt Mathilda said. Actually, she would have liked to know more. But she knew her super-detectives wanted to be alone. "Keep me posted, okay?"

"Sure," Jupiter promised, as he stretched his arms forward and did three and a half squats. At least that's what he thought it was.

Bob and Pete broke out in laughter. "The power-muesli is already working," Pete smiled.

“You’re welcome to help yourselves,” Jupiter countered. “Now, let’s get to work. We have some things to make up for.”

8. The Beauty and the Publisher

“Hold on a second,” Bob said. “I have to call Sax again. I’m sorry.” He picked up the phone.

“We’ll wait outside,” Jupe said as he and Pete went to the door, “but make it quick so we can get going.”

For more than an hour, they had racked their brains as to how Mary and Jason Berger are related. Bob had even checked the newspaper archives, but that didn’t help. Mary herself was undergoing a lengthy and painful treatment and was not allowed visitors all day. At least they had learned from old newspaper reports where the music publisher Berger had lived at that time—in one of the old villas in West Hollywood. And that’s where they wanted to go now.

“It’s okay.” Bob was in the doorway. “I have to go to Solemint for a show tonight. But I have until seven.” He locked the office door, and the three of them left the salvage yard.

They drove past the circus grounds via Thousand Oaks in the direction of Pasadena to Hollywood Freeway and turned west again two blocks beyond the Chinese Theatre. Rows of tourist buses were there at this world-famous promenade—the most distinctive attraction being the concrete path which bore the signatures, footprints, and hand-prints of famous motion picture personalities.

“Just get out of here,” Pete groaned, “the traffic is terrible.”

Jupiter checked an old city map he took out from the glove box. “We’ve got to turn right over there. Berger’s house must be somewhere between Fountain Street and Sunset Street.”

Slowly it became calmer on the street. Gardens with tall old trees and dense hedges surrounded the stately houses, many of which looked a bit run-down. “The red brick building over there, that’s Colonial House,” Bob explained, “and that’s Villa Andalusia next door.”

“Wow!” Pete was amazed. “How did you know all this?”

“Last year, I took a course on architectural styles at school, and I was in a study group on architecture. My group has been here before to study the different building styles of these houses,” Bob explained. “I think you can park somewhere here.”

They got out. “Welcome to the world of the rich and the super-rich,” said Pete, extending his arms in exaggerated theatrical fashion.

Every house had its own special features. Many have inner courtyards. The overwhelming majority were shielded by lattice gates to prevent unwelcome visitors. Some of the villas were also very close to each other.

“Look at that!” cried Jupiter. He had saw a lavishly-tiled inner courtyard. Many small tiles in rainbow colours surrounded a filigree multi-level fountain. The bubbling water glittered in the sun.

“Great,” Pete said, “I have to come here again with Kelly”

“Somehow I can understand this violinist,” Bob said thoughtfully. “That’s something quite different from a cobbled-up circus caravan.”

“Here it is.” Jupiter had discovered the address he was looking for. “1500 North Harper. This was where Jason Berger lived.”

“Maybe he still lives here,” said Pete enterprisingly, “All alone and completely secluded from the outside world. And we’re probably the first visitors he’s received in an infinite amount of time.”

“Oh, don’t be silly,” Bob interrupted him. “He must have been dead a long time ago.”

They entered the driveway, which was paved with white pebbles. Cascades of red geraniums poured down from the roof of the house. To the left and right of the entrance door stood artistically-trimmed box trees. It’s like a movie set, Bob thought.

Jupiter tugged a heavy bell cord. They could hear a full tone gong inside the house. Nothing moved. Jupiter looked at the lush floral decoration and discovered a small surveillance camera. He poked Pete’s arm. “Your hermit is obviously on the cutting edge of technology.”

Silently the heavy front door opened. The Three Investigators stared blankly into the dusky interior.

“Hey,” said a child’s voice. A little blonde girl peeked out from behind the door.

Pete was the first to react. “Hello! Who are you?” he said in a friendly tone and stretched out his hand to the little one.

“Shirley!” Out of the darkness came a pleasant but somewhat annoyed voice. “I’ve told you so many times not to just open the front door.”

A petite woman came out and looked at the boys with a quick glance. “Yes? Can I help you?”

Pete was particularly agile again. “I’m Pete Crenshaw,” he said, “and these are my friends Bob Andrews and Jupiter Jones.”

The two nodded and made a bow, which they considered appropriate. Pete presented the young woman with one of their business cards:



“We’re looking for a man who used to live here,” Pete asked.

“Come on in. It’s okay with us,” babbled Shirley.

“Well, we’ll have to ask your mum first,” Jupe intervened. He was anxious to look very serious. “We are friends with a young artist who may be related to a man whom we believed used to live here. We would like to find out more about him.”

“What’s the man’s name?” enquired the young woman.

“Jason Berger,” Jupiter said.

Shirley’s mother took a thoughtful look at the business card. Then she made an inviting gesture. “Come in. I think I can help you. And perhaps you can also help me as well.”

They entered and looked around. Behind the massive but simple front door was a huge hallway, dominated by a wonderful staircase. On the left side, the room opened into a park-like garden.

“Let’s go to the terrace,” the woman said.

“Fine,” Shirley shouted, “I’ll get us soda from the kitchen.”

“But don’t carry it yourself! Please go tell Hannah. You’re drinking a lemonade, aren’t you?”

“For me, soda water, please,” Shirley replied.

Pete whistled quietly. Not even here could Jupe forsake his good intentions. The hostess went ahead. She looked sporty, had short dark blond hair, wore bermudas—made of leather, as Pete immediately noticed—and a sleeveless blouse made of washed silk.

The Second Investigator looked down at himself stealthily. He wore only one of his washed-out polo shirts, which were left at Headquarters for emergencies. A great shirt would've been more appropriate here.

They sat down at a wooden table with a beautiful potted oleander plant on it. Now Jupiter took command. "Are you related to Jason Berger?" he asked her hostess politely and pulled a small notebook out of his denim jacket.

"Yes and no," the woman replied. The three of them looked at each other in amazement.

"I think the first thing I need to do is to introduce myself. My name is Kubinsky, Alma Kubinsky. Shirley, my daughter, you've already met."

An elderly woman came out onto the terrace and placed a tray of drinks on the table.

"Thank you, Hannah," said Mrs Kubinsky. "Please take Shirley to the pool so we can talk here." She turned back to the boys. "So you're detectives." They nodded. "And your friend is Mary Jo, right?" she asked suddenly.

Jupiter was startled. He hoped Alma Kubinsky didn't know Mary personally, otherwise, the little con would be blown. "Do you know Mary?" asked Jupiter.

"Just from stories." Bob and Pete also breathed a sigh of relief. "But I've wanted to get in touch with her for some time now." She smiled for the first time. "I'm really glad you showed up. It might make things easier for me." The three friends looked at each other questioningly.

Pete shrugged his shoulders. "We don't quite understand you," he said impatiently, reaping a punitive look from Bob.

"Mary sent you, didn't she? The story I want to tell you, please pass it on to Mary, and if she wants, she should contact me."

What followed was an excursion into the past of the Berger family, very detailed, with many lovingly-portrayed persons and richly decorated details. After some time the housemaid returned and brought back more drinks, peanuts and a bowl of fruit. But The Three Investigators barely noticed her. Mrs Kubinsky had captivated them with information that were absolutely crucial for their investigations.

Jason Berger had a little son with the violinist, Christie Clinton. When she died in a tragic swimming accident, Jason Berger was unable or unwilling to take care of the child so he gave him to a mission in the south. A few years later, he met a Jewish emigrant. He married her and adopted her daughter from an earlier marriage. He never contacted his son again, but sent him money through a middleman. The boy was told that it was the legacy of an old uncle.

Berger's second wife, Alma's grandmother, only learned of the child's existence after many years. "She urged Jason to look for him, but he wouldn't. So she proceeded to search for the young man herself, without my grandfather knowing," Alma said. "But it was too late: He and his young wife had been victims of a plane crash. Grandmother hid the whole story from my grandfather. And only after his death, grandmother told me and my mother everything."

Investigations were made. The lawyer of the Berger family found out that the young couple had had a daughter. She has lived in a boarding school since the death of her parents.

Mrs Kubinsky continued: "We wanted to tell her the whole truth and take her back with us. But a teacher who had become something like a foster mother for Mary advised us against it." That was six years ago. Since then, Alma Kubinsky had always wanted to write a letter to Mary. She looked at the three boys. "And what's Mary Jo like? Likeable?"

“Great class,” Pete said and he turned a bit red. All four were silent. From the garden they heard funny children noises.

Jupiter leafed through the notes. “I think we’ve got everything,” he said thoughtfully. “It’s quite a complicated family history.”

“May I invite you to dinner? I’d be very happy.” Alma Kubinsky smiled again. Bob looked at his watch and thought about his appointment with Sax Sendler.

“No, thank you,” Jupiter politely refused. “We have to go. We held you back long enough.” He took a little break. “And thank you so much for telling us all this.” Then they got up.

“I hope you might help me get in touch with Mary. She’s practically my cousin.” She looked at the three of them seriously. “I can count on you, can’t I?”

“Of course,” Pete said with a little bow.

“We’ve handled many complicated cases,” Bob added with pride.

At the door, they shook hands with Mrs Kubinsky.

“Goodbye,” Bob said.

“Maybe we’ll bring Mary with us,” Pete said.

Outside, Jupiter clapped his hands. “That was a very successful trip. Now all we have to do is prove that Winkler is not the rightful heir. We shouldn’t have any trouble with that. Then Mary di Domenico gets the collection and a new family.”

If only it was that simple, Jupiter!

9. Planning Phase Underway

For the whole morning, the First Investigator had to help out at the salvage yard. A truckload of household goods and furniture had been delivered. Jupiter kept the inventory list, while Hans and Konrad unloaded and stacked the cupboards, chests of drawers, old copper pots and washbasins. Uncle Titus had bought the lot a few days ago from an old house in Rocky Beach and was very proud of it, especially of some beautiful items such as a small jewellery box with a wonderful inlay and an old sewing machine.

“Done!” Hans groaned when everything was stowed away. The more valuable things went into the storeroom. Everything else was stored under the canopy along the fence.

Jupiter had registered every single item. “I’ll save the whole thing on my computer and have the list printed out.”

“Thank you, Jupe,” Uncle Titus said, “For the rest of the day, you are dismissed. The day after tomorrow there’ll be another lot to handle. I’d be happy if we could get this over that like we did today.”

“Sure, I’ll be glad to help,” Jupiter replied.

Just like his uncle, Jupiter had a lot of sense for old things. He had been responsible for the inventory list for several years. He worked conscientiously and was always allowed to choose items that interested him. So gradually, The Three Investigators had gathered all sorts of gadgets and equipment for their headquarters, including a printing press, an answering machine, and walkie-talkies.

Jupiter went into Headquarters, sat down at his desk and switched on his PC. Carefully he entered the list, and minutes later the printer buzzed. After filing the new inventory list, he put the folder outside the door. Hans or Konrad would take it when they came by.

He went back to the desk and looked at the clock. Bob and Pete should be coming soon. Together they wanted to plan the next steps of their investigation.

“Hello!” Aunt Mathilda distracted him. She was standing at the doorway with a big bowl of salad. “Uncle Titus told me you were busy this morning.” She held the bowl against him. “Here, you go! It fills you up and it’s healthy.”

“Thank you,” Jupiter said happily, taking the bowl from her.

“Here are two more forks... if Bob and Pete comes.”

“Should have been here by now.” Hungrily, Jupiter went for the salad. Where are they? If they were going to be late, they could have at least called. He really needed to have a serious word with his partners. Then he heard the three panels swinging to the side at the fence.

“We’re already here!” Pete shouted, as if he had guessed Jupe’s thoughts.

“It was my fault,” Bob apologized. He had made a mistake with the time and sat calmly with two girls at an ice cream parlour when Pete went to pick him up at home. It took Pete almost an hour to look for Bob.

“I thought about something on the way here,” Pete said, grabbing a fork and threw himself at the salad.

“Good news, I suppose?” Jupiter said. “So tell me what that something is...”

Jupe was in a sarcastic mode, but Pete did not let it upset him. “I think we need to be more direct now,” Pete said. “We don’t have much time. I suggest we meet Harry Winkler.”

"I'm for it. We just have to think of some plausible reason why we want to talk to him." Jupiter pinched his lower lip. "I actually wanted to first talk to Mary myself."

Pete looked at him in astonishment. "Are you having second thoughts about her?"

"No, I believe you, she's a nice woman, but somehow..." He broke off and patted Pete on the shoulder. "But your suggestion to go to the circus has priority now. And what do we say to Harry Winkler?"

"We'll just simply say that over the holidays we've taken on the task of finding out if a pro would be willing to conduct a circus programme or workshop at our school," Pete suggested. "When adults hear that students are doing something for their school, they're more likely to listen."

"Super idea!" said Bob. "The planning phase is running smoothly again." He stood up, set aside the empty salad bowl, and solemnly laid a blank sheet of paper on the desk. "Well, folks, let's get the process started." Juve looked at Bob approvingly.

"Don't look so funny," Bob remarked. "You're not the only one who can think. Since we've been with Mrs Kubinsky, it's clear we've taken a case, right? ... And we want to finish it, right?" Bob bent over the sheet of paper.

"Let's see... Point One," he noted. "Knivel wrote a will in favour of Mary di Domenico. Date: February 29th. Point Two: Winkler has a handwritten letter, but it was only been around since March. Point Three: We know how Jason Berger and Mary di Domenico are related, but we still don't know why Knivel appointed Mary as his heir." Bob looked up. He was red-hot with zeal.

"Point Four," Jupiter continued. "Mary falls off the rope. Accident or attack? Point Five: We're not the only ones interested in the will. Point Six: Next Tuesday the decision will be made in court."

All three stared at the sheet of paper.

"I can think of something for Point Five," Bob said thoughtfully. "If we go to Winkler now, we may be recognized as the night intruders."

"Right." Jupiter frowned. "On the other hand, those who saw us can't do anything."

"But they'll know who we are," Bob remarked.

"Bob's right," Pete said. "This could be dangerous."

"Not if we know exactly what we want," the First Investigator said. "We agree that the two men were interested in Knivel's will." Jupiter had stood up and marched up and down the small office. "But why?" He looked at Bob and Pete.

"Winkler's letter could be a phoney," added Jupiter, "Or at least the date. And a great forger can forge even more." He pinched his lower lip. "It could be that he thought there was no will. Then his letter would probably have been enough to prevent the collection from falling to the state. Now there's a will."

"In order to completely invalidate the first one, you need a second, newer one," Pete said. "That's what my grandfather told me when he made his will."

"So before Winkler can present the letter, we have to find proof that it is older than he claimed," Jupiter intervened again. "Assuming, of course, that our hypotheses are correct."

"Or better yet, prevent the whole nullification of the will. But how?" Pete ran both his hands through his hair. "Don't we first have to find out why Knivel wanted to make Mary an heir?"

Jupiter thought. "It takes too much time. Besides, if our assumptions are right, it's not really important. You're convinced Mary isn't cheating, aren't you?"

"Sure!" Pete cried. They kept quiet.

“How about...” Bob asked after a while, “if Pete goes back to Mary, tells her who we are, tells her the story of Mrs Kubinsky and asks if we can go to Knivel’s house to check out the collection?” He looked at Jupiter.

“And the two of us will meet with Winkler, just like Pete said,” Jupiter said. “I guess the only way we’re gonna get anywhere is to go to the circus. Danger or no danger.”

Jupiter sat down again. He pulled out the programme booklet from the desk drawer and dialled the number indicated: “Hello,” he said politely. “Can I speak to the director, please? ... Good, then his secretary.” It was easier than expected. Jupiter got an appointment for the next morning. “School always pulls. That was a good idea,” he praised Pete when he hung up the phone. “If everything goes smoothly there, we’ll go to Knivel’s house afterwards: officially or unofficially.”

“Shouldn’t we notify Inspector Cotta?” Bob said.

“Cotta? I don’t know,” Jupe replied. “Maybe it’s too soon.”

“How about we ask Worthington to drive us to Knivel’s house in Sacramento?” Pete suggested.

Worthington was a chauffeur with the Rent-’n-Ride Auto Agency. The Three Investigators had met him a few years ago when Jupiter won the company’s competition and received rides in a chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce for a limited time. Just before this privilege expired, a grateful client from a previous case arranged for them to continue using the service at any time they wished.

Since they all had their driver’s licences, The Three Investigators rarely engaged the British chauffeur and his Rolls-Royce. But Sacramento was too far. In addition, it could be advantageous if an adult companion was present.

“I’ll take care of it,” Bob offered.

Jupiter beamed at his friends with satisfaction. “And with that, we deserved a little trip to the beach.”

“Without me,” Bob groaned. “I have to work at Sendler’s. “You know, contact lenses deserve to be earned.”

“And I promised Kelly a tennis lesson,” Pete said.

“I’ll just go alone,” Jupiter grumbled, trying not to look as annoyed as possible. In fact, the other two didn’t notice anything. Maybe he should try his luck as an actor, he thought as he looked forward to an afternoon with Lys.

10. Operation Circus

Harry Winkler stirred his coffee. “Well, I don’t know if I can help you,” he said in a friendly voice. “There are always school groups coming our way. But cooperation all year round is practically impossible for us.”

“And how about a workshop?” Jupiter had been prepared for this answer. “So on three or four consecutive weekends, maybe soon after the trimester starts?”

“Not on weekends, we have two shows a day. But two days a week for three weeks, that’s possible.” Winkler didn’t seem unfriendly at all. He had brown curls, wore a small moustache, and had it not been for his crooked nose, he probably would have been considered handsome.

While the First Investigator was talking to the Circus Director, Bob looked around inconspicuously. He did not see anything suspicious. And they had not yet discovered a man with a stature of their pursuer.

“What kind of performance are you thinking of?” the Circus Director asked with interest. “Juggling, acrobatics, ...?”

“Actually, more of tightrope walking,” Jupiter said, sounding as natural as possible.

“Then go straight to Walter de Maria, if you want. I think he’s training right now. If you pay him his expenses and if he agrees, I’ll give him time off.”

“That would be great,” Jupiter said, somewhat irritated, because Winkler was so accommodating and now he didn’t know how to proceed.

“Of course we can’t do anything during the holidays now,” Bob came to his aid and kicked Jupiter in the leg under the table.

“That’s right,” Jupiter continued. “Our director won’t be back until the last week of vacation. He’ll have to make the final decision.”

“That’s understandable,” Winkler replied. “But you should talk to de Maria first, shouldn’t you?” For the first time Jupiter had the impression that Winkler was looking at him rather suspiciously.

“Of course, Mr Winkler. For the time being, we thank you for your willingness,” said the First Investigator with a big smile on his face. “Do you mind if we take a look around?” He’s already throwing himself at it, Bob thought. If that only works out well!

But obviously Winkler had no suspicion after all. He offered them a tour with an inviting gesture and pressed the button of the intercom. “Jeannie, come here a second.”

The door opened, and a blonde with too much make-up came in. “Jeannie, here are some young friends who would like to be guided through the circus. And then they would want to talk to Walter de Maria.”

“Sure, Harry. I’ll just get you your mail first.” She turned around and left the office.

Bob and Jupe got up and thanked Mr Winkler again for the support. The secretary came back and put a bulging folder on the Circus Director’s desk and asked the boys to come along.

“We’ll stay in contact,” Winkler said jovially.

“Thanks,” Jupiter hummed quietly as they stepped out of the office caravan into the open.

“What do you want to see?” their guide asked kindly.

"The animals," Bob replied.

"And the clowns," added Jupiter.

They circled round the circus tent. There was a lot of activity on the grounds. Between the caravans, some artists trained. Clotheslines were stretched, on which laundry fluttered in the wind. In front of the café stood tables and chairs. Somewhere someone practised the blues on the trumpet. Nothing reminded them of the uncanny atmosphere a few nights before. Then they came to the cages.

"This is Tina," Jeannie introduced them to a lioness. "She can be very sweet, but also very gruffly." Jupiter thoughtfully looked at the lioness, who laid in her cage without movement and looked at the visitors indifferently. Well, Tina, the First Investigator said to her in his thoughts, you'd rather be in the African grasslands than performing tricks here in California. Tina blinked at him at that moment, as if she had thought exactly the same thing.

In the opposite cages were three tigers. Behind it stood the cage of a brown bear and next to it the stables of the horses and elephants. "Come with me," said Winkler's secretary, "I'll show you our baby." They entered a straw-lined stable. Behind an almost shoulder-high wall stood an elephant calf. "Look, back there. Isn't it sweet?" In the back corner, Bob and Jupiter spotted the calf.

"A circus offspring isn't an everyday thing. That's why we're so proud of our Stella." Jeannie patted Russell's mother. "She likes that. You can pat both of them if you want."

They petted Russell. His skin felt like sackcloth. Stella really seemed to like it. She stepped from one leg to the other, making a few squealing noises.

"How often do elephants have to train?" Bob asked with interest.

"Depends," Jeannie replied. "They rehearse a new act at least once a day. When they've already mastered an act perfectly, then they rehearse about twice a week."

"You've been in the circus a long time, I suppose?" Jupiter mingled into the conversation and stubbed Bob inconspicuously at the side. He wanted to get down to business now.

"For two years."

"Oh," Jupiter pretended to be surprised. "Then you knew Jacky Knivel."

"Of course," Jeannie replied.

"He was a big star, wasn't he?" Jupiter continued the conversation as they left the stable. "But what was he like as a human being?"

Jeannie stopped and thought. "It's not easy, you have to say that. Our boss had many bones to pick with him. And our other clowns..." She shrugged her shoulders.

"Yes, yes," Jupiter said emphasizing precociously, hoping that she would respond.

"Over the years many people had become difficult to work with..." But Jeannie didn't finish her sentence. They entered the circus tent. In the middle ring two snake women trained. In addition, eight men tried to form a pyramid at a fast pace. Some kids were jumping around. The lonely trumpeter continued to practise his blues stubbornly. The whole time Jupe and Bob had looked around inconspicuously. There was nobody that looked like the fat night pursuer.

"Where are the clowns, then?" Jupiter asked as vaguely as possible.

Winkler's secretary led them to the large table that stood at one side of the tent. "This is the training schedule," she explained, looking at her wristwatch. "They'll be on about a few minutes from now, and then after, comes Walter de Maria. Would you want to stay here and watch? Then I could get back to work. If anyone asks you what you're doing here, just say you're the director's guests." The two nodded and thanked her for the hospitality.

"Come, we'll sit up somewhere there." Jupe pulled Bob's T-shirt. "Then we won't stand out so easily."

“Do you think our fat pursuer is a clown?” Bob asked.

“I don’t know,” Jupiter replied. “He may not even be part of the circus. But if he is, he won’t be one of the snake people or with the trapeze. And the jugglers are all slim, too.”

The trumpeter fell silent. “Now the whole band!” screamed a tall man in jeans and a white shirt. “And the clowns’ invasion.” Loud music set in. Bob and Jupe seemed out of place in the empty tent. Three clowns jumped in and bowed to the audience as if they were getting a thunderous applause. All three were slim and lanky.

Jupiter looked at Bob and shrugged his shoulders resignedly. “Pipo,” screamed the clowns. “Where’s Pipo? Without him, it’s hard for us to be funny!” One began to sob loudly and heart-rendingly. The second one pretended to break his guitar in grief. “I’ll go find Pipo,” said a third with a mock Italian accent. “There’s a fat man there,” Bob whispered to Jupiter. “Now I remember, this was the last act before the break, when you were with Lys in the café.”

Pipo stepped up. He was indeed quite roundish. “Against him, I’m an asparagus stick,” Jupiter muttered. “I guess he’s padded up for his appearance. Somehow we’ll have to get to him afterwards and see him without the costume.” Bob nodded but felt a little queasy.

“Let’s go down,” Jupiter suggested. “We need to get close. See that man over by the curtain? That is Walter de Maria. We’ll talk to him now, before the clowns leave.”

“If you say so,” Bob agreed.

They got up and walked up to Mary’s partner. “Hello, Mr de Maria,” Jupiter said deftly. “The Circus Director sent us to see you.” After they gave their names, Jupiter repeated his story. Bob looked around stealthily again. The four clowns were just heading to the climax of their act, splashing each other with water. Pipo moved with amazing agility. Incidentally, the man who had run after them had also moved particularly well, despite his body size.

“We’d get back to you as soon as school starts,” concluded Jupiter.

“Gladly,” Walter de Maria said courteously. He was very muscular, and when he laughed, his beautiful and strikingly white teeth came to light. “Do you have a proper gym?” he asked.

“Of course,” Bob joined in. “A pretty high one, actually.”

“The height is not important at all,” laughed the artist, “because on the first day you only walk over the rope lying on the ground, so that you’ll get used to the feeling. And then it’s stretched up to a metre or so.”

“Great! I’ll definitely be part of it,” Bob said enthusiastically and for a moment forgot that the whole workshop idea was just a camouflage.

Walter de Maria was next on the training schedule. After Mary’s accident he had changed the performance and now worked alone—on a rope seven metres high.

“I’ll try the part with the bike today,” he announced to the ring workers. But Jupiter and Bob couldn’t keep an eye on him.

The clowns came right at them. “Let’s go!” Bob whispered. “... Or he’ll see us.”

At the same moment, Pipo saw the two and was startled. Despite the make-up, it was possible to see how his laughter became a grimace for a moment. Without turning around, he walked past them.

Jupe poked Bob in the side and whispered: “Did you see that? He recognized us.”

“I think so too.” Bob recalled the night escape once more. They left the tent. “Now what?” Bob asked the First Investigator.

“What would you do if you were Pipo?” Jupiter replied.

“Go to Winkler, of course,” Bob replied. He lowered his voice because one of the two snake women came towards them.

Jupiter nodded and pointed to the equipment wagons behind the café. “That’s where we will be least noticed.”

“Hopefully,” Bob remarked.

They made their way between two caravans and kept an eye on Winkler’s office. They strolled inconspicuously towards the equipment wagons. As they walked by, they took a look at Mary’s caravan. The door was closed, drawn curtains blocked the view into the interior. Jupiter shrugged his shoulders.

“Quick!” Bob dragged Jupiter by the sleeve behind one of the wagons.

Pipo, with his make-up hastily removed, walked towards the office. He looked around suspiciously.

“I think you owe me an explanation,” the artist said suspiciously to someone.

11. Another Visit to the Fairy

Pete told Mary di Domenico about The Three Investigators and gave her their business card. Then he spoke about Aunt Mathilda's music box and the visit to the circus performance—without mentioning what Jupiter saw Walter de Maria did behind the curtain. Then he took a deep breath. Depending on how things went, he might confess to her that they had been in her caravan. "We want to help you get your inheritance."

Mary remained sceptical, but slowly showed interest. "Have you heard anything about the accident investigation?" Pete asked.

"Yes," Mary replied. "There was something on the rope. Obviously, I got stuck to it with my shoe. Do you know more details?"

"No, not yet. But we did other investigations," said Pete.

"That sounds good!" She tried to smile, but it only painfully distorted her face. "And?"

"Well, well, you shouldn't be mad..." Pete hesitated.

Mary raised her eyebrows. "Please tell me," she said in a friendly manner. "I'm not biting, not right now anyway."

"Well, we broke into your caravan," said Pete.

"You what?" Mary laughed in surprise.

Pete continued: "We've been looking for the will." He paused. "And we found it, too. But there were two other men who were looking for it."

The artist didn't laugh anymore. "What are you telling me?" she asked.

"When we were at the circus last Thursday night, the two men wanted to get into your caravan. They drove us out, but I think we drove them away, too."

Mary was still holding the business card. "So you're serious about this?"

"Of course," Pete replied somewhat offended. "We have already solved many complicated cases."

"Well, well." Mary di Domenico obviously thought about whether she should get angry or continue on to satisfy her curiosity. "Have you spoken to Sherlock Holmes about this yet?"

Pete did not allow her mockery to upset him. He listed the points they had compiled the day before at Headquarters. However, he kept the family history to himself. The artist looked at him thoughtfully without saying a word, but now she seemed to be more convinced of their investigative work.

"Do you think there's any chance we could get into Knivel's house?" asked Pete.

"I can talk to his lawyer," replied Mary.

"But please don't tell him why. It's better to be safe than sorry. Just say we'd love to see the collection for our school assignment or something."

"Would you bring me a glass of water?" Next to the rainbow spot between her chin and ear, Mary seemed to have turned a bit blue.

"Do you want to lie down?" Pete asked anxiously. "Or do you want me to go?"

"No, no," she said. "I only have a dry throat."

Pete got up and brought her some water. "When can you go home?"

"Probably by the beginning of next week." She looked at him sadly.

Pete feverishly considered whether he should tell her about Alma Kubinsky after all. The young woman seemed a little insecure and helpless. After all, it was not advisable for her to return to the circus before the case was solved.

“Have you ever been to West Hollywood before?” Pete asked.

“For probably two or three parties,” Mary replied. “That was in the earlier days when I worked in television. Why?”

“Not a bad neighbourhood, is it?” Pete wasn’t sure how much to tell her. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Yes, really,” she asserted and laughed at him.

“Then I must tell you something else,” Pete said and he thought he saw her flinch.

“Nothing bad. Something nice, actually.” He stopped. He didn’t feel at all comfortable in the role of a family reunifier. Then he gave himself a jolt and continued. “Well, we found out something about your grandfather.” Mary di Domenico bent forward in surprise and stared at him.

“Mr Jason Berger. That was your grandfather, isn’t he?” Pete continued.

She leaned back again. “That can’t be right,” she said.

“Oh yes,” said Pete confidently. “Your grandmother was a very good friend of Jacky Knivel. Then she married Jason Berger. They had a son, but...” Pete broke off, scared.

Mary was just sitting there and started to cry.

“Please don’t cry,” he said uncertainly and stroked her hand very carefully. He didn’t know what to do or how to behave. Then he remembered similar scenes at the movies. He pulled a handkerchief out of his jeans and placed it clumsily in her hand.

Mary looked at Pete. “Now please do tell me all one more time, slowly.”

Without interruption, Pete told her all the details by recalling all that they have summarized on Jupiter’s notebook before the visit. He also reported what Alma Kubinsky had told them.

When he finished, Mary looked out the window, lost in thought. He remained silent until suddenly and abruptly she turned her head to him. “And I thought you were just a bright, nice boy.”

“That’s me,” Pete said, choking a little. “But not only that...”

The young woman shook her head. “Three boys I don’t even know are changing my life. Just like that.”

Pete shrugged his shoulders. “We were surprised at what Mrs Kubinsky told us.” He looked thoughtfully at the artist. “Will you call her?”

“Of course,” Mary said without hesitation. She had got back a grip on herself. “I think I’m going to have to no matter what the outcome of the inheritance dispute is.”

Pete waved it off. But the artist stood up, just came up to him and gave him a kiss on the right cheek. He looked at her in disbelief and turned bright red.

“Thank you. And I want to meet your two friends, too.”

Pete stood up. He stuttered when he reminded her of Knivel’s lawyer and said goodbye.

“Hear from you again!” Mary shouted after him. He nodded, closed the door and wondered if he really should tell Jupe and Bob everything. He thoughtfully patted his right cheek.

12. The Coat of Arms

Worthington quietly and safely chauffeured the black Rolls-Royce with the gold-plated fittings to the north. The Three Investigators were on their way to Knivel's house.

Mary di Domenico's intervention had worked wonders. Without difficulty, the lawyer had given them the key and address of the clown's estate. According to him, the house has not been entered into since Knivel's death. It was located southwest of Sacramento, more than 350 miles from Los Angeles. But Worthington was a seasoned driver.

"What a sled!" Pete said appreciatively, referring to the big Rolls-Royce as it rolled smoothly through the wide San Joaquin Valley on the Interstate 5. Normally he preferred to drive himself, but for long distances he was glad Worthington was there.

They kept quiet. Bob browsed through a music magazine. Pete had taken a car journal with him, and Jupiter looked at the sprawling landscape. He wondered what to expect at Knivel's house. And above all, what should they do if they found nothing at all? He sighed and pinched his lower lip.

"How much longer do we need?" Jupiter became impatient.

"Well, it all depends on the traffic. Under normal conditions, we'll be in Sacramento in half an hour." Worthington not only drove safely, he also kept to the prescribed speed limit at all times—especially when he's with The Three Investigators. He probably do not want to set them a bad example. In addition, the fines for speeding had become higher and higher.

"Super," Pete interrupted the silence.

"Anything new in the car world?" Jupiter wanted to know. "The auto journals again presented new models that doesn't run on petrol or electricity, but on vegetable oil. And the air stays clean."

"It's going to happen soon," Worthington informed him. "The government has decided that California will soon have only a limited number of petrol-powered cars."

"My father says that this is also urgently necessary," Bob announced.

"Of course, it's urgent, because otherwise we'll suffocate," Jupiter said. "But then we'll have to do without our beloved luxury car." He patted the backseat. "I'm sure she'll never run on vegetable oil."

"There will always be Rolls-Royce lovers," Pete contradicted with a connoisseur's expression. "You can bet your life on it. They'll find a solution."

A short time later they reached the suburbs of the Californian capital. Worthington obviously knew his way around there. They drove along the Sacramento River, past the zoo and the mighty white domes of the State Capitol.

"I'm famished," Pete said. "Can we take a break?"

"I'll look for a parking space here, and then we can have a bite to eat in the old town," said the chauffeur. "Are you okay with that?"

"Of course," Jupiter said, determined. "You go to a snack stand and I'll go to a salad bar."

Bob looked at him approvingly. "You're really serious now. Great! Somehow you can see it already." The First Investigator doubtfully looked at his waistband. His green T-shirt was still pretty tight.

Worthington had found a parking space. They climbed out of the car. Some passers-by threw curious looks at them, but they were already used to that whenever they ride with the sled.

“But we don’t have much time,” Jupiter reminded his friends of the real reason for their trip.

“Well,” Worthington said, “then I’d suggest we split up.” He pulled an old gold-coloured watch out of his vest pocket. “In thirty minutes, we’ll continue the journey. I’ll be on time.”

“Of course,” the Second Investigator replied quickly. “You always are.” They watched as Worthington vanished into the crowd.

“And what do we do?” Jupe asked.

“Find a salad bar,” Bob replied. “It can’t hurt us either if we don’t constantly stuff ourselves with fries and hamburgers.”

“All right, let’s go,” Pete said.

The old house rows reminded them of a western town. All the buildings were of wood and had terraces with railings under their porches. “... For our horses,” Bob joked.

“Over there.” Pete had found a restaurant ‘Salad and Sweets’ that stood over a fake saloon façade. They entered and took a few moments to find their way around the dark room. At the front was the self-service bar with various salads and raw vegetables. High wooden barrels replaced the tables. Just to the right of the door was the cashier flipping through a magazine, looking very bored.

The three of them picked up the bowls and inspected the salad bar. After loading their bowls, they went to one of the wooden barrels and began to eat in silence.

“I’m excited about Knivel’s house,” Jupe said suddenly.

Bob nodded. “I wonder what’s in store for us. It won’t be easy to find any proof of our suspicions.”

Pete finished his salad first. “Honestly, I’m not full.”

“You can still get some sweets,” Bob suggested. “Then you won’t starve to death.” He then looked at the clock. “Man, we gotta get back, and we gotta get back fast!” Pete quickly grabbed some sweets.

They went back to the car in a hurry. Worthington was already behind the wheel. “Have you eaten anything?” he asked nicely.

“Yes, but not enough.” Pete opened a bag of sweets. “Do you want some?”

Jupe, who was deep in thoughts about Knivel’s house, reached into the bag.

“Hey!” Bob gave him a friendly jab. “What about your good intentions?”

The First Investigator wrapped the candy back guiltily. His gaze fell on the golden wrapping paper. “What’s that?” he asked in surprise.

“He feeds himself healthy for four days and seems to have forgotten all his former sins,” Bob told him. “‘Carmel Caramel’, don’t you remember? You ate them by the kilo.”

“No, I mean that emblem there,” Jupe pointed to the small emblem on the wrapping paper. “I’ve seen this somewhere before.”

“Sure, man,” Pete said, “It’s on all the sweets of ‘Carmel Caramel’.” Jupiter didn’t respond.

When Worthington drove out of town, The Three Investigators remained defiantly silent.

“I got it!” Jupiter suddenly shouted. “It was in Knivel’s will!”

“What was in Knivel’s will?” Bob asked.

Jupiter wouldn’t let himself be put off. He took a good look at the candy’s wrapping paper again. “A bird of prey with a snake in its beak,” he said thoughtlessly, “and a flowering cactus in its claw.” He thought hard.

Now Pete also looked over. "Looks like the Mexican coat of arms."

Jupe turned to Bob. "Was Knivel Mexican?"

Bob shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know."

"Sorry to interrupt," Worthington said, "but we're here. That house over there on the left must be it."

"Good, Worthington. Please stop outside the gate." Jupiter was digging for the keys.

"Let's do it, then. Maybe Knivel's house holds some clues. I feel like there's something going on in there for us. Bob, did you bring our case?" They got out. Bob had the black case tucked under his arm.

"As a precaution, I'll take the flashlight with me," Pete said.

"I'll wait in the car," Worthington told them. He knew from previous ventures that the trio could find themselves in dire situations during an investigation, so it was a good thing for someone to keep an eye on the entrance. "See you later, and good luck!" he shouted after them. But they no longer heard him, as they trudged through the front garden towards the stately white house.

13. All Cleared Out

They stood in front of a large door decorated with carvings. Knivel's house had two floors. The roller shutters were lowered on all windows.

Jupiter put the key into the keyhole and turned it. Then he opened the door. A musty smell came towards them.

"It's really dark here," Bob said and scanned the wall for a light switch. "Ah, here." It clicked, but stayed dark.

"I'm sure the power's off," Pete said. "Then we'll just pull up a roller shutter." Jupiter went to one of the wide windows. But he found no device to move the roller shutter. "Obviously electronically controlled."

Pete switched on his flashlight. When they got used to the dim light, they looked around. They were in a spacious main hall from which a wide staircase led to the upper floor. To the left and right of the entrance were doors that led to two other rooms. They saw a wide sliding door opposite them, but it was closed.

"Let's go find Knivel's desk," Jupiter said.

"Left or right?" Bob asked.

The Three Investigators opted for the left door. Behind it was a large room, bordered by a semi-circular window front. It was very well equipped with typical living room furniture—sofas, arm chairs, coffee tables, and display cabinets. On one end of the room, was a bar counter with stools.

"Not bad, a bar." Pete gave an admiring whistle. "But no sign of Knivel's famous collection here."

Then they went to the room on the right, which was the library. There were more furniture including huge bookcases that reached up to the ceiling. And there was a big desk in the middle of the room.

"Aha. The desk, that's it." Triumphant, Jupiter turned to the other two. "Let's check it out."

Bob slowed him down. "Let us see everything first. The desk will still be there for us."

Jupe agreed and so they returned to the main hall and went up the stairs.

"Not quite as stately as Alma Kubinsky's house," Pete judged, "but it's also enviable. Imagine that in sunshine!"

Upstairs they found the bedrooms and bathrooms. None of the doors were locked.

After they had inspected all the rooms, they returned to the ground floor. Again, there was no sign of Knivel's collection. Jupiter went to the sliding door. It had brass handles, one of which also has a small keyhole. He tried to push the door open, but it didn't move. "We'll need the case here," he said enterprisingly.

"I'll be right there, Jupe," Pete told him.

While Pete was working on the sliding door, Jupiter pinched his lower lip violently.

"Done!" Pete pushed the sliding door open. "Oh! Look at this!"

In front of them was a huge, elongated hall, which adjoined the house at right angles. It was completely empty. No pictures on the wall and not a single piece of furniture was there.

"The collection should have been here," Pete said. As if struck by a blow, they stared into the empty hall.

"That's not possible," Bob groaned. "Inheritance dispute, accident, family reunion and theft. It's actually a bit of too many things at once."

"We Investigate Anything"—it's still our motto, right?" Pete remarked.

Jupiter had caught himself again and grabbed the flashlight. "We'd be laughing if we do not find any clues here. Take a good look around."

Jupiter went ahead looking around the hall and shone the flashlight on the wall. "There were pictures here. Do you see the bright spots?"

"And here are drag marks on the floor. Shine the light here!" Bob examined the parquet floor. "I guess someone was in a hurry."

They then arrived at the other end of the hall. There was also another big sliding door. "I wonder what's behind it," Pete thought out loud.

"Maybe a driveway outside," Bob suspected. "Somehow Knivel must have transported those things out. I suggest we just walk around the house. There must be some tracks."

Jupiter nodded to him. Perhaps the disappearance of the collection had something to do with their visit to the circus yesterday. Was somebody getting nervous?

"Off to the garden," Jupiter commanded. They stepped through the front door. The bright sun blinded them. "Follow me." Jupiter ran to the right, past the round window front. They saw the long main hall and at its end there was a small ramp. It was surrounded by high bushes. An unpaved road led up to them. The First Investigator looked around. "Completely hidden. So we don't even have to ask the neighbours."

Bob knelt down to ground. "And?" Pete asked impatiently.

"There was a truck here." Bob pointed to tyre marks. "And not long ago, too. Look here."

Jupiter and Pete looked down and, like Bob, put a finger on the track. "The earth has not dried yet. The track was definitely made today."

"But why did someone take the collection away?" Pete looked at Jupiter thoughtfully. "Where has it been taken? After all, it takes up a lot of space."

"Remember that the lawyer said that nobody has entered the house since Knivel's death," Bob added. "Perhaps it was stolen?"

"Yes, good point," Jupiter said. "Who took it? Winkler should never risk such a thing. If it was found out that he stole it, his chances of getting the inheritance would be gone. As it is now, he's got as good a chance as Mary."

They went back to the house and checked out the desk. The drawers and side panels were locked. Pete groaned and took a lock pick out of the black case. Bob looked at the huge bookcases on the walls. "Couldn't letters be hidden there too?"

"We could take weeks to look there," Jupiter replied. "But we only have a few days left."

Pete did not take long to open the big middle drawer. Then he attempted the two side panels.

Jupiter opened the drawer. "Look here," he cried enthusiastically. "We couldn't ask for any better!" Finely arranged, stapled together or tied with ribbons, were stacks of documents.

"That's what I call order." Bob was impressed. "We can't keep up with that at Headquarters."

But all they found were found bills, all of them with the handwritten word 'Paid', two thick folders with business cards, blank stationery, envelopes and autograph cards. "There's no letters here," Bob said, disappointed.

"If Knivel compiled his correspondences, it wouldn't fit into this drawer either," Jupiter reassured him. "It must be somewhere else."

“Look!” Pete found a wooden box in one of the two side panels. It had a heavy lock, but Pete expected no difficulties to unlock it. As he searched for a matching lock pick, Jupiter carefully checked the interior of the two side panels. He saw an old picture frame, a thick business directory, some books, a pile of circus photos, and the Carmel town directory.

“I got it!” Slowly Pete opened the lid of the box. In it, was a neatly tied pile of about twenty-five letters. On top were several sheets of blank paper. Jupiter took one of them and pointed to the upper right corner.

“A coat of arms,” Bob said, perplexed. “And it looks exactly like the emblem of ‘Carmel Caramel’ but what does that mean?”

“The paper is old anyway,” Jupiter judged, “and pretty valuable—handcrafted paper.”

“... Of all the things you know.” Pete swayed his head seemingly impressed.

“For that, you’re the better lock-breaker.” The Three Investigators took the box with them, and the Carmel town directory. They locked everything up again and removed any traces on the smooth desk surface with a handkerchief.

“Spread the dust,” Bob grinned. “I always do it in my room, too.”

Worthington sat in front of the Rolls-Royce in the sun. “What’s up now?” he enquired. The three of them looked at each other.

Jupiter had an idea. From here to Carmel was only 150 miles, at least over the Diablo Range. The road through the mountains would not trouble Worthington or the car.

“I’m sure there’s some connection between Knivel and Mexico or between Knivel and Carmel,” Jupiter thought. “Take a look at these letters, and I’ll look in the directory. Maybe we’ll find a clue.”

14. Hot Trail to Carmel

“Hey, look,” Bob said while Worthington was quietly driving the car across the country road. He held up an envelope and waved it around under Pete’s nose. “Guess what this is.”

“I’m not a psychic,” Pete grumbled.

“You’ll never guess it anyway,” Bob replied. “This is a letter I found in Knivel’s box.”

“Ah, yes. I would never ever thought of that. Don’t make it so exciting,” Pete snapped. “Who is it to, and what does it say?”

“Dear Mary,” Bob read, “I’m very sorry that last night ended like this. I’d like it if we could talk again about everything. Please contact me. I’ll be in Carmel for the next few days. Jacky.”

Pete looked up, startled. “That doesn’t have to mean anything,” he said slowly.

“Let me see that letter, Bob,” Jupiter intervened. “There’s no date on it, is there? This letter was addressed to Mary but it was not sent to her, else it would not be here. So it’s possible that the two had an argument at some point in time—but it could be any time from years ago to shortly before his death.”

“Did Mary ever mention something like that?” Bob asked.

“No,” said Pete. He didn’t like the fact that the fairy-like Mary di Domenico suddenly came under suspicion. He shook his head vigorously. “I’m sure she has nothing to do with these events.” No one gave a response.

A short time later, the three of them leaned back in silence. They had gone through all the letters. They were all personal letters, and they learned a lot about Knivel, but nothing new about the collection.

“Are there any leads with Mexico?” Jupiter asked. He had decided not to go into the argument between the clown and Mary any further. “Or with Carmel?”

“None so far,” Bob replied.

“Maybe...” Pete began hesitantly, looking at the other two, “Maybe Mary can help us. Or do you still trust her?”

“Well. The fact is she didn’t tell us about the argument, there must be a reason for that,” Jupiter said.

“Call her,” Bob told the Second Investigator. “We’re not getting anywhere on our own.”

Just before entering Pacheco, there was a phone booth. Worthington parked the car, and the three got out. Pete collected coins from his friends and went off to the phone booth.

The landscape was breathtaking. The rocks shone in the sunshine, nowhere were houses or villages to be seen. Jupiter leaned against a warm rock and held his face in the sun—if only Lys was there now, he thought. That’s when Pete came back. He was blue and looked distant. “What’s the matter?” Jupiter asked.

“She’s disappeared,” Pete replied, stunned. “The nurse noticed the last visitor was a fat man who behaved rather strangely.”

“Pipo!” cried Jupe and Bob together.

Pete got a little paler. “Pipo?” he stuttered. “He also sent recovery wishes to her at the hospital.”

“So the clown who wanted to go into her caravan at night also wished her a speedy recovery,” Jupiter murmured and leaned against the warm rock once more. “Too bad we’re now so far away.”

“What should we do?” Pete asked. “The nurse said some of Mary’s clothes were gone as well.”

“Her clothes?” Bob asked unbelievably.

“Yeah, she must have had some clothes at the hospital, and that’s gone,” said Pete.

Jupiter stared silently into the mountain landscape. He’ll have to make a decision... and fast!

“I’ll call Lys. She’ll have to help us now.” He stormed off to the phone booth.

The two remained silent until the First Investigator came back. “Okay,” he said. “I’ve contacted Lys. She’s going straight to the hospital. She’ll be there in an hour and will wait for our call. We’re going on to Carmel now. Time’s running out.”

They ran back to the car. Worthington drove down the narrow boulevard to Gilroy. In some turns, there was a wonderful view almost up to the sea. But The Three Investigators didn’t feel like they were interested in the scenery.

“Okay, first the collection disappears, and now the presumed heiress,” Bob said. “But assuming Winkler is behind the theft, why would he kidnap Mary, too?”

“Or Mary isn’t quite as innocent as she seemed...” Jupiter suggested.

“That’s enough!” Pete interrupted Jupiter harshly. “She is innocent. I know it! You don’t even know her.” Bob gave a meaningful look at Jupiter. But he refused an answer and just stared out of the window.

“Where am I supposed to take you in Carmel,” Worthington asked when he turned to the coastal road. “Are you interested in Clint Eastwood’s city hall?” The world-famous actor had been mayor of the city on the Pacific for several years.

“City hall,” Jupe said thoughtfully. “That’s not a bad idea. There might be someone there who knows about Knivel. Or at least why there’s a Mexican crest on the candies of ‘Carmel Caramel’.”

Worthington drove swiftly south through Monterey. It was now late afternoon, the sun was full and reddish-yellow over the blue sea—like on a postcard, Jupiter thought.

“If you’re thirsty,” the chauffeur offered, “help yourselves from the bar. I bought soda, lemonade and ginger beer.”

“No, thanks,” Pete said mournfully. The other two also did not take up the offer, but stared outside silently.

Worthington had heard the argument and wanted to comfort the three boys: “Maybe your Mary had to attend to something unexpected.”

“She has several broken bones. She’s not leaving the hospital in that condition,” Pete stated grimly. “If she’s been kidnapped, it’s our fault!”

“Now calm down, Pete,” Jupiter said sternly. “There are other possible explanations for her disappearance, and you know it.”

Worthington drove into the parking lot in front of the town hall. At the information desk was a woman in a funny, colourful dress.

“Hello,” greeted Jupiter. “We’re from Los Angeles, and we don’t know much about this place.”

The woman nodded nicely. “How can I help you?”

“We’re on the coast up to San Francisco looking for Mexican tracks.”

Bob had to smile. Jupiter always came up with some story. Then he pulled one of the caramel sweets out of his pocket and showed the wrapping paper to the woman. “We would

like to know why the coat of arms is printed here.”

They were lucky. The woman knew something about it. “The family that started this candy factory here in Carmel over 150 years ago came from Mexico.”

“Ahh,” Jupiter responded with interest. “And today? Do their descendants still live here today?”

“No. The factory has long since been sold to a Japanese multinational, the house too, and the last descendant returned to Mexico City after the great earthquake—as a great benefactor, by the way.”

“You said house,” Bob interrupted. “Where’s that?”

“House is not quite the right expression. It’s almost a small castle. Close to the Borromeo Mission.”

“What’s in it today?” Jupiter’s thirst for knowledge had not yet been quenched.

“I don’t know.” The woman shrugged her shoulders. “Somebody bought it. That’s all I know.” She laughed apologetically. “But we do have a few other places of interest here. Would you like to take our brochure with you?”

The Three Investigators thanked her politely. They didn’t have time for sightseeing now, but maybe they came back sometime when the case was solved. Jupiter still managed to get some direction to the small castle. Then they left the town hall.

The First Investigator directed Worthington through some beautiful old roads right by the sea. Then a house with a column portal appeared on the right side of the road. “That’s it,” Jupiter said.

Suddenly, Bob shouted almost simultaneously: “Get down!”

They ducked in a flash. “What’s the matter?” Juve hissed, but kept his head down.

“Keep going slowly,” Bob told the chauffeur, “and tell us exactly what you see.”

“We’re outside the house now,” Worthington said. “Above the entrance, by the way, is a stylized Mexican coat of arms.”

“Go on,” Jupiter said. He hated moments when he couldn’t control the situation. And it was uncomfortable, too. “There is a truck parked to the left of the sloped driveway at the back.”

Pete said triumphantly. “I’ll bet ten thousand dollars and my MG that I know what’s happening there.”

“It is obvious. They’re unloading the collection,” Bob said a little irritated. After all, he was the first to see the whole situation. “When we passed the truck, I recognized the driver. It was de Maria.”

“Walter de Maria. Then Winkler must be behind it!” Juve held his breath. “Knivel obviously bought this house. And that’s how he got his hands on the old valuable stationery of the sweet company.” He paused. “But why is the collection brought here?”

“What’s going on out there?” Bob asked the chauffeur excitedly.

“Two men got out of the car and spread out a tarpaulin. I can’t tell what they’re unloading. An oleander hedge is blocking the view.”

Jupiter looked very carefully over the edge of the window. He saw the truck, but not the men. “Walter de Maria? Are you sure?” he asked Bob again.

“Yes, very sure,” Bob replied.

“We know what’s going on here now,” Pete intervened. “Let’s move on.” He wanted to call the hospital as soon as possible.

Not half a mile further, Worthington dropped them off at a phone booth and drove back to Knivel’s house to observe the happenings.

Jupiter and Bob pushed each other into the phone booth and watched Pete dial the hospital number. "This is Pete Crenshaw," he said hastily. "May I speak to Mary Jo Berger, please? ... What?" He rolled his eyes. "No? No... Really?" He looked at the other two in horror. Jupiter nudged him. "Is there a visitor for Miss Berger? Her name is Lys de Kerk... Yes? ... Could I speak to her, please?"

Pete wiped the sweat off his forehead and passed the phone on to Jupiter.

"Hello, Lys," said Juve. "Yes... Pete just told me. We're all nervous now... And?" He listened calmly to her. "Okay. Thank you, Lys." Jupiter hung up the phone.

"So Mary has indeed disappeared without a trace," said Jupiter. "But Lys says there's nothing to indicate a kidnapping." All three would let themselves fall into the meadow under an overhanging oak tree.

Everybody was thinking about it.

"How old do you think this is?" Jupiter asked suddenly.

"Who?" Pete asked back. He was just thinking about Mary.

"The oak, of course," Jupiter said dryly. "Probably older than the USA."

"... And you have nothing else to worry about?" Pete popped him in the side.

"What does Mary know about Knivel and Mexico, and why did they argue?" Bob asked after looking silently at the sea for a few minutes.

"I don't know," Jupiter sighed, "But I know we're gonna sneak to the back of that house over there now, no matter what happens to Mary. We've wasted far too much time on that question. Come on!"

Pete gave him a bad look. Jupiter pretended not to have noticed him.

They scrambled up and crossed the street. Then they searched the back of the houses for access. "Here!" Bob had run a few steps ahead. "We can go through here." The First Investigator put his finger to his lips.

The fifth house from the cross street had to be Knivel's. The narrow path snaked a little to the left and after the fourth house it turned to the right. Suddenly, they stood in front of a dense, impenetrable hedge. Pete and Bob tried to turn back, but Jupiter held them back.

Once again he put his finger to his lips. Then he put his hand to his ears signalling to his friends to listen and he then he pointed to the hedge. He looked around. When they huddled on the ground there, they could not be seen from any of the surrounding houses, but if they were lucky, they could listen to the events behind the hedge.

They didn't have to wait long. Steps crunched on the gravel.

"If the boss would ask me..." a voice said.

They twitched. The voice was very close.

"He won't ask you," a second man interrupted.

Jupiter recognized that that was the voice of Walter de Maria.

"Then I ask you," the first didn't give up. He breathed heavily. "Is this junk or not?"

"How should I know?" the tightrope artist replied.

"But if it's not junk, then it must be worth a lot."

The footsteps on the gravel were moving away. Pete stretched his toes to his full length and took a peek over the edge of the hedge. The two of them dragged an obviously heavy object into the house.

Jupiter, Pete and Bob then retreated back to the cross street.

"Pete, could you ask Worthington to bring the car here now?" Jupiter ordered. "It doesn't matter if they see you. They don't know you." Pete nodded and ran off.

"And then we'll take the fastest route home," Jupiter continued. "I have a feeling it's more complicated than we thought."

Worthington stopped the car next to them. The two joined Pete in the backseat. Jupiter convinced the chauffeur that now was not the time for a romantic sunset drive across the highway. Worthington stepped on the accelerator, and The Three Investigators sank into the comfortable seats.

The next time Worthington looked in the rearview mirror, all three had already fallen asleep.

15. Jupiter Goes All Out

The Three Investigators were sitting at their desk at Headquarters the next morning. In front of them laid Bob's notes. "We have to find Mary first. That's the most important thing now." The Second Investigator gestured excitedly with his arms.

"First we have to find an explanation for what we saw yesterday," Jupiter decided. "Otherwise we won't get anywhere."

"Jupe is right," Bob tried to appease Pete. "That's in Mary's interest, too."

They kept quiet while a forklift rattled outside. Actually, Jupiter was supposed to update the inventory list today, but Uncle Titus understood the situation and gave him the time off.

Bob tapped his forefinger on the notes from the previous day. "Why did Winkler take Knivel's collection from one house to the other?"

"Well, of course I don't really know, but..." Jupiter started.

"Are you sure?" Pete gave him an unfriendly look.

Jupiter wouldn't let himself be put off. "He can still hope to be proved right in the probate hearing."

"Exactly," Bob interrupted. "So it seems stupid to steal the collection now."

"Not really," Jupe said, while he was still thinking, so he did not elaborate.

"Is there a buyer for that at all?" Bob asked. "The collection is known throughout the world. And once it's been leaked that it's been stolen..."

"Of course," Pete interrupted. "If you ship that stuff out of the country, you could lose track of it pretty fast."

"Look, at this point in time, neither party knows enough to be confident that he or she would win," Jupe pointed out. "Winkler seems to be the more interested party, but we cannot rule out Mary wanting the collection for herself."

"What do you mean by that?" Pete asked in an angry tone.

"We do not know whether Mary left the hospital on her own or not," Jupiter explained. "What we do know is that she was not there, at the hospital, when the collection was being unloaded at Knivel's Carmel house. Therefore, we cannot rule out the possibility that, not Winkler, but Mary di Domenico is the legacy hunter."

"You're starting again," Pete interrupted him. "Mary would never do anything illegal. She was..."

"Stop it!" Bob hissed. "What's the matter with you? You can like the artist all you want. But you cannot prevent us from considering all possibilities. That's what we've always done, and that's what we're doing in this case. You got it?" Bob had really talked himself up in a rage.

Jupiter looked up in surprise at Bob. They rarely talked to each other in that tone. Angrily, Pete and Bob stared at each other. No one spoke a word. Then the ringing of the telephone got them out of their mood.

Pete answered it: "The Three Investigators, Pete Crenshaw speaking... Yes? ... Really?" Then he said nothing more for about a minute, and in the end only quietly: "Thank you. Goodbye." Beaming, he put down the phone. "That was..."

"... Mary?" laughed Jupiter and Bob.

"No," replied the Second Investigator, paused to test the curiosity of his friends. "That was..."

"Well, tell us!" Bob shouted.

"That was Alma Kubinsky," Pete finally said. Jupiter and Bob looked at him questioningly. "Mary called her yesterday. Mrs Kubinsky brought Mary out for one night, with the doctor's consent. Early this morning, when the two came back, they learned of the commotion surrounding her disappearance. What happened was the night nurse had food poisoning, so another replaced her and she didn't know anything about Mary's trip. So Mary's off the hook."

Jupiter shook his head slowly. "It's not that simple," he said softly. "Nothing is proven with her reappearance."

"Do you still suspect her?" Pete flared up again.

"First of all, we know that Pete makes important points, but we don't have time to argue," Jupiter continued. "The probate hearing is in two days, and in this short period of time we cannot possibly take care of our squabbles."

"Okay. So we'll start all over again," Pete said. "Mary told me that the collection was last examined officially about a year ago in Sacramento. So everyone's gonna think they're still there. So why did Winkler move the collection? If we had not happened to be in Carmel yesterday, nobody would have known where the collection had gone to."

"Nobody except Winkler and his accomplices," Bob said. "If he loses the court decision, no one can take the collection from him, because it is no longer where everyone else expects it to be."

"Exactly," Pete joined in. "Mary would have gone to the house and walked into an empty hall." They looked at each other in silence and were glad that the argumentative mood had been overcome.

"Carmel is on the Pacific coast," Jupiter picked up the discussion again. "If Winkler doesn't get the collection awarded to him, he can ship it pretty fast and smuggle it out of the country."

"All right," Bob said, "that would give us a reasonable explanation, or at least part of it. What does Winkler actually do if he gets the inheritance?"

Pete was on top of it. "It's obvious. He'll accept it, of course," he cried. "Once the collection is legally his, no one will care where it is, especially when an official estimator need not be called in. But Knivel and his gang will know exactly where it is—in Carmel." He looked around the room cheerfully.

"And even if someone asks, if the collection is not in one of Knivel's two houses, it's in the other," Pete continued. "Our Circus Director certainly could give a very harmless explanation, for example, Knivel himself organized the transport before his death."

Jupiter grinned at Pete with approval. "Who says you can't do more than pick a lock?"

"Heh!" Pete threatened him with a friendly fist and grinned proudly. It wasn't every day that Jupiter would give praise.

The First Investigator once again began to pinch his lower lip. "I think we'll start with Pete's theory and go back to the circus right away. There's still a lot to figure out, but I've got a plan."

A short time later Jupiter gave the signal to leave. The plan was not free of risks, but it had to be carried out. There was little point in waiting any further. They took the walkie-talkies out of the desk drawer, locked the office and left the salvage yard through Red Gate Rover.

They went silently in Bob's Beetle. All three were immersed in their thoughts of the case. Pete was thinking about Mary in the hospital who possibly had no idea that her boss had the collection taken away. Bob was thinking about how the whole thing got started with Aunt Mathilda's music box. And Jupiter imagined what he would expect in the director's office in a few minutes' time.

"There are still some details to discuss," Jupiter broke the silence when the circus appeared before them. The other two nodded.

16. In a Jam

They synchronized their watches. Pete slid the walkie-talkie under his black T-shirt into his waistband and stomped off determinedly.

The other two sat on the grass behind Bob's Beetle. Jupiter peered into the sun and wiped a few beads of sweat off his forehead. He wished he'd left his denim jacket at home, but where would he put the walkie-talkie? Until he could hide it as elegantly as Pete did under his T-shirt, many muesli, salad and soda water days would be required.

"Do you think it'll work?" Bob asked. Jupiter shrugged his shoulders.

Suddenly, the walkie-talkie sounded: "Second here. Can you hear me? Come in, please!"

"First here, come in," Jupiter said.

"Jupe!" Pete's voice sounded pretty nervous. "The fat clown is sunbathing in front of the café. I haven't seen Walter de Maria yet."

"Okay, we'll wait. Take care of yourself. Over and out," Jupiter said.

"I'd rather have gone myself." Bob breathe heavily. "The waiting is torturing."

"Waiting is part of the craft," Jupiter said in the tone of a head teacher. "Sherlock Holmes, Miss Marple, Philip Marlowe or Lee Archer were true masters. And so is Jupiter Jones, of course. Bob Andrews should also be on the list."

Bob pretended not to hear a word. Slowly the minutes passed.

Again Pete's voice was heard on the walkie-talkie: "Second here. First, come in."

"First here. We hear you."

"de Maria is training now."

"How much longer?"

"He just started. I'll call you again when he finishes. Over and out."

Jupiter looked at his watch. More than twenty minutes later, he received the message from Pete. He leaned towards Bob. "Here we go." The First Investigator patted his stomach, or on what was left of it after a week of the strictest diet. "I'm prepared, anyway."

The walkie-talkie sounded again. They heard the circus band in the background. "This is Second. Please..." Suddenly the contact broke off.

Jupiter was startled. "What's going on now?" For a moment, cracking and scratching sounds came out of the walkie-talkie.

"First here. Come in, Second. We're listening." Jupiter hectically pressed the receiver button. "Second, please respond."

Pete didn't return the call. The line was silent. Bob had jumped up. There was only one explanation—Pete had been caught!

Jupiter was the first to recover. "We gotta do something."

"Indeed," Bob reaffirmed.

"Right now." Jupiter nodded. "But what? Pipo's at front of the café. We can't just walk by there. He'll recognize us right away."

"We'll sneak up from the side of the cage to the tent," Bob suggested.

Jupe put his thumb up, and then they ran off. They circled the circus grounds using a longer route. Then they jumped over the barrier behind the elephant stables. No one saw them.

Jupiter raised his hand and they both ducked behind a straw bale. "I'll try again," he said breathlessly. He took the walkie-talkie. "Second, come in. First here." There was no response. Carefully they continued their tour under the cover of the straw bales.

"Hold on!" Bob pulled Jupe down by his jacket. Two little boys ran by them with a football. But they didn't pay attention to the two strangers. When they had arrived behind an equipment wagon, the walkie-talkie suddenly sounded again. They heard clear bits of a conversation. "... I didn't!" That was Pete.

"Hello, hello!" there was a voice coming through the line. Jupiter looked at Bob in horror. "Hello, hello! Is anyone there?"

"I told you so," Pete was heard again.

"You villain," someone said sharply. "I'm gonna pull your ears out."

"Winkler!" Bob whispered. "Is it him?" Jupiter nodded.

"Ow! Let go!" Pete yelled.

"If you don't leave right away, I'll give you a beating," Winkler threatened. "Go now or I'll call the police! You have the nerve to spy around here!"

Jupe and Bob breathed a sigh of relief. They looked around. Here they were safe for the moment. They saw no one. And there was nothing to hear except the sounds from the animals.

"I'm sure Pete will be in touch soon," Jupiter said quietly, holding the walkie-talkie to his ear.

Bob looked at him with excitement. The seconds seemed like hours to them. "Come on, let's go," Bob whispered impatiently. "We can't sit here forever."

Jupiter flinched and put his finger to his lips. Then the walkie-talkie sounded. "Second here," he heard Pete say breathlessly, "Please respond."

Bob came very close and held his ear to the radio. "First here," Jupiter replied quietly. "Where are you? Come in, please."

"Behind Mary's caravan. But I can't stay here long. There are always people walking around. Where are you?"

"A good fifty yards behind you, by the equipment wagons. What happened?"

"I wasn't too attentive. Winkler suddenly appeared behind me when I pulled out the walkie-talkie. He thought I was from a competitor."

"Did Pipo and de Maria see you?"

"No."

"Then stick to our plan," Jupiter said. "You've got nerve."

Bob nodded approvingly. "We just don't have another chance. Or do you just want to go home and pretend like nothing happened? Think of Mary."

"Well, yeah. I can see the café from here," Pete reported. "Now they're both there. And Winkler went back to his office."

"Then everything's fine," Jupiter said. "Good luck to you. Over and out." Jupiter breathed a sigh of relief. He didn't like it when his plans were thwarted.

"Are you ready?" he asked Bob and he put the walkie-talkie into the pocket of his denim jacket again.

"Sure," Bob said in a firm voice.

They left their cover between the equipment wagons and walked along the fence to the entrance. There they slowed their pace and, without looking to the left or right, they pretended to chat animatedly, walking towards the office caravan. On reaching the café, Jupiter looked carefully out of the corner of his eye towards Pipo and de Maria. The two of them were immersed in a newspaper. They entered the office caravan.

"Hello," Jupiter said in a particularly friendly manner. "Here we are again." Winkler's secretary looked at them in a stupefied way.

"We agreed with the director that we would get back to him today," Bob said in the same tone of voice as before. "And since we were in the neighbourhood..."

"It's all right," Jeannie interrupted. "He's in, you can go in. But not for long. He has an appointment in ten minutes."

With Jupiter leading and Bob behind, they walked past the blonde straight to the Circus Director's office. The First Investigator knocked on the door. "Come in," they heard Winkler's jovial voice. They opened the door and went in.

"You again?" Winkler pulled up an eyebrow.

"Good day, sir," began Jupiter. "We happened to meet our class teacher on the beach yesterday, and he's really excited about the idea..."

"... that you're finally telling the truth," Bob added. He tried to sound really cutting.

Winkler's reaction showed how well he had hit the mark. "Excuse me?" The Circus Director started.

"Tell the truth. You legacy hunter..." Jupiter had also changed key.

For a moment the Circus Director stared at them in disbelief. Then he rumbled off: "Get out! Right now! Or I'll get the..." He stopped. "Oh, wait! That's right, there are three of you!"

Jupiter and Bob nodded triumphantly.

"Well, wait, you super smart ones." He came up to them with his fist raised. Jupiter and Bob took a few steps back.

At the same moment, a babble of voices came from outside the door. The door flew open, and Pipo and de Maria came in. "You wanted to see us, Mr Winkler?"

"What are you doing here?" Winkler snapped. Jeannie looked curiously over the clown's shoulder. "Come in quickly. Close the door. And you..." Winkler turned to his secretary, "take a break and have a coffee." Jeannie closed the office door and went off.

Jupiter unobtrusively pressed the transmit button of the walkie-talkie. Pipo and Walter de Maria looked at the two boys in an inconclusive way.

"May I present..." Winkler said mockingly. "Two little snoops."

While the tightrope artist did not move, the clown flinched. "They were here a few days ago," he said.

"I know," the director snarled at him.

"You don't know," Pipo gave back.

Winkler frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"They broke into Mary's caravan the other night."

The Circus Director didn't answer. Again, he threateningly approached the two detectives. "Sit down!" he roared and pointed to a small bench at the side of the office.

Jupiter briefly touched the walkie-talkie hidden under his T-shirt and Winkler saw him doing it. "Give that to me! Or should I get it myself?" the Circus Director demanded. Jupiter looked at Bob and shrugged apologetically. Now everything depended on Pete. He took the walkie-talkie out of his pocket and handed it to the Circus Director.

He turned the walkie-talkie off and threw it on the table. "What were you doing in Mary's caravan?"

"In the first place, what was that clown doing in Mary's caravan?" Jupiter snapped back.

"Here I ask the questions and nobody else does." Winkler turned to Pipo. "And I'm going to ask you to explain why I'm only now hearing about this break-in." He raised his voice again. "Can you come up with something?"

“Calm down,” Walter de Maria joined in. “It’s no use now. We don’t have time to lose. These two have to be out of here. And far away.”

“Is that a confession?” Jupiter asked, unperturbed. He’s got a lot of nerve, Bob thought admiringly.

In his rage, Winkler walked over and gave both of them a punch in the stomach.

“Auuuuuuuu!” screamed the First Investigator particularly loudly—hoping that someone outside would hear him.

Winkler then went to the cupboard behind his desk, opened a narrow door and pulled out a pistol. “This is so that peace and quiet can be restored,” he said mockingly. Bob turned blue. Pete, Pete, Jupiter thought, please do not waste too much time.

“Come on now.” Winkler faced his two accomplices. “You two go ahead. We’ll take the van.” Then he pointed the pistol to Jupe and Bob and said: “And you two, come with me. And no tricks. In my former life I was a marksman.”

Winkler hid the pistol in his jacket pocket and then they all walked out of the office—de Maria and Pipo leading, followed by Jupe and Bob, and at the rear was Winkler. No one paid any attention to Jeannie.

“Now left,” the director demanded. They walked up to an inconspicuous grey van.

“Without circus advertising,” Bob whispered to Jupiter, “they’ll never find us!”

“Shut up!” Winkler pointed to the back of the van. “In there. We’re going on a little trip. And I’ll show you some of my tricks.”

17. Kidnapped in a Panel Van

Following Jupiter's plan, after Pete had fooled the tightrope artist and Pipo into believing that the director wanted to see them urgently, he quickly left the circus grounds. The Three Investigators had agreed that Jupiter would set his radio to send as soon as Winkler's accomplices came into the office.

When the circus was out of sight, Pete pulled his walkie-talkie out of his waistband. He got the spare keys to Bob's Beetle and got in. Waiting wasn't easy for him. Impatiently, his fingers drummed on the steering wheel.

"Come on," he murmured. Finally cracking sounds came over the walkie-talkie.

"... two little snoops." He recognized Winkler's voice immediately and held the walkie-talkie to his ear. "Sit down!" he heard the Circus Director roar. The reception was bad as it cracked terribly. Then he heard a bang. And then nothing at all. "Darn!" He shook the device, but it stayed silent. "Take it easy," he tried to calm himself down. Still, his hands sweated.

With narrowed eyes, Pete looked over to the circus grounds. He couldn't see anything from there. He couldn't even see the office caravan. He was thinking: Jupe, Bob, Pipo and de Maria had undoubtedly met at Winkler's office. But then what went wrong? Finally he made a decision. He jumped out of the car and ran back to the circus grounds, taking the longer route. He was stalking, but halfway there, he saw a grey van driving away towards the coastal road. Pete stopped, frightened. What if the two of them...?

At that moment, he was looking alternately at the road and the circus tent. If he wanted to take up the pursuit, he could not lose any time. But what if the van belonged to someone else such as a supplier, and his friends were waiting urgently for his help on the circus grounds? Nervously, he ran through his hair. He had to make a decision. Meanwhile, the van had reached the coastal road and turned north. Once again Pete listened to the walkie-talkie. But it was silent.

"Let's go," he sprinted back to Bob's Beetle. If Bob and Jupiter were still at the circus grounds, they would probably be safe as there were many people around. However, they won't if they were in the van.

Frantically he put the key into the ignition and started the engine. He had a quick thought wishing that he was in this MG as Bob's old Beetle may not be fast enough. Anyway, with screeching tyres he drove off.

The van had disappeared from his sight because the coastal road turned right. Pete constantly hoped that no trucks would slow him down. He made a swerve to the north and stepped the accelerator. After a mile and a half, he nearly hit a car after a sharp bend. Then he let himself fall back and increased the distance between himself and the van a bit, but not too much as there were too many junctions on this route.

The journey continued north. Pete forced himself to think calmly. If Winkler and his accomplices held Jupiter and Bob captive, he alone had little chance of getting them out. Of course he could call Inspector Cotta, but in the meantime he could lose sight of the van. And besides, he could laugh if the van was empty—but then it would mean that he had wasted precious time in the pursuit.

“How far would Winkler go?” he asked himself. His voice sounded strange. In his memory, the face of the Circus Director suddenly seemed brutal and hard.

The left turn signal of the van lit up. “Towards Casitas Avenue,” Pete murmured. The pursuit on the road now became even more difficult, but at least he knew the area well. He followed the van at a reasonable distance. Meanwhile Pete was quite certain that Bob and Jupiter were in the van in front of him. A supplier wouldn’t have turned into this deserted area. He had come quite close to the van when a telephone booth appeared on the right side of the road. Without thinking twice, he put on the brakes.

It took a long while for Inspector Cotta to get on the phone. Pete described the situation to him in brief sentences. It was risky, and Cotta had not much of a choice but to ask Pete to keep following the van, “... without putting yourself in danger. You just follow and do nothing else. Are you listening?” said the inspector forcefully. “If the van turns off the main road, leave us some sign. I’ll alert my colleagues. We try to come from two sides.”

Pete hung up, ran back to the car and with the engine howling, he started the pursuit again. He was a good driver and manoeuvred the Beetle well even on the winding road. But despite on high speed, there was no trace of the van far and wide. Pete pushed the accelerator a little harder. There were only a few cars on the road. He focussed and searched with great effort. There hadn’t been a turn-off so far, so the van had to be ahead of him. He made a sharp left turn, then into a tight right bend. The tyres squeaked. After a sharp turn, he just about saw the rear lights of the van disappear.

Pete breathed a sigh of relief and reduced his speed a little. He didn’t want to get too close. After a few minutes, he noticed the van’s left turn signal. It then turned into a dirt road.

In the meantime, he had prepared himself for it. Bob’s bathing clothes were in the backseat. In a quick movement, Pete threw a towel through the wound-down window onto a bush at the road junction. His aim was good as the towel remained like a flag hanging from two branches.

The bumpy dirt road went slowly downhill. Then he reached a narrow gorge. Half a mile later, Pete parked the Beetle on the side of the road. It was better to continue the pursuit on foot, as the van only made progress at a walking pace.

Hastily Pete got out of the car and ran ducked through some small trees to cut off to the next right turn. He saw a cloud of dust and in the middle of it, the brake lights of the van. The engine noise had stopped.

The sudden silence made Pete helpless. He was dizzy with fear. He couldn’t help Bob and Jupiter on his own. What would he do if Winkler had a gun? Pete swallowed and looked back at the road. What happened to the police?

A man got out. It was Winkler. He went to the back of the van and opened the door. Pete saw him holding a gun and waving his two friends out. The Second Investigator was quietly groaning.

“The ride’s over,” he heard the Circus Director say. In the meantime, Walter de Maria and the clown had also got out of the van.

“What are you gonna do with these two, Harry?” Pipo asked. For a moment it looked as if he wanted to stand in the way of his boss.

“I only want to question them,” Winkler shouted. Then he added a sharp “first,” and Pete got goosebumps. Somehow he had to signal to Bob and Jupe.

The Second Investigator huddled behind a fallen tree trunk. The sun fell through the branches. High up in the treetops, some birds chirped. “That’s it,” Pete murmured. Lys was a great animal sound imitator and had played two recordings of singing birds to them a few

weeks ago. They were particularly amused with the Red-bellied Flycatcher. "It doesn't only live in China," Jupiter had mocked at the time, "it also chirps in Chinese."

Meanwhile Winkler drove the two with a bossy hand movement to the left side of the gorge. Pete's heart was thumping. He formed his hands over his mouth into a shell and tried to imitate the Red-bellied Flycatcher. Jupiter and Bob did not respond. "Please!" Pete begged. "Please remember!"

Winkler had already arrived at the rock face and leaned against it. Bob and Jupe had to stand back to back in front of him. Pipo and de Maria kept an eye on the road.

When Jupiter looked towards Pete's direction, Pete let out the Flycatcher's chirp again. Jupiter subtly stretched his right thumb up for a fraction of a second.

Jupe and Bob were trying to buy time. They skilfully delayed their answers. They contradicted each other twice on purpose. Winkler got angry and snarled at them. They repeated themselves many times.

On his knees and elbows Pete quietly crawled back to Bob's Beetle. It was a good eighty metres separating him from Winkler's accomplices. The car was hidden from them by dense bushes. When he was sure he could not be noticed, Pete jumped up and sprinted down the dirt road. Shortly before the junction, two police cars, wrapped in a thick cloud of dust, approached him. With few words he informed Cotta, who immediately directed his men to proceed further up the dirt road.

"You stay here," the inspector ordered the Second Investigator before his police car proceeded on. Pete stayed behind obediently and sat down on the ground.

About fifteen minutes had passed, he suddenly he heard Jupiter shouting: "Red-bellied Flycatcher! Where are you?" Pete then saw Bob and Jupiter coming down the dirt road, out of breath. They had seen the police cars and simply overpowered Winkler before he realized what was happening.

"Here, here!" Pete shouted and chirped the Red-bellied Flycatcher again out of sheer enthusiasm. The Three Investigators hugged each other and patted each other on the shoulder.

"You did a great job! Great teamwork!" Jupiter cried. Normally Pete would have felt embarrassed with such an unusual praise from Jupiter, but he was too exhausted.

"Without you, this could have gone seriously wrong," Bob shouted. "That was amazing!"

After a few minutes later, Inspector Cotta and his colleagues showed up with the trio of criminals in the two police cars. The clown looked at them with sad eyes. The Circus Director grinned sarcastically.

"Now to you three," Inspector Cotta said with a serious face. "I'm used to your antics." The three young detectives pulled their heads in. "But that," he said, stressing slowly, "was really quite a job. I'm proud of you." Jupiter, Pete and Bob looked at him in surprise. Cotta had rarely been so exuberant.

"Nevertheless, we still have to talk about this." The inspector cut off any comment. "We've been after this Mr Winkler for some time. He only uses the circus as a cover." Cotta was silent and stroked his chin with his hand. "And the clown confessed to us just now. From a fraud case a few years ago, Winkler had him and Walter de Maria in his hands."

The Three Investigators grinned at each other with satisfaction. They agreed without words. The whole complicated inheritance story with Jacky Knivel, Mary di Domenico and the collection—they could tell him about it sometime later when it is quieter.

"By the way," Cotta continued, "the clown has also cleared up on the tightrope accident. He admitted that he had tampered with the rope."

"Well, yes!" Pete shouted. He was very sorry Mary did not hear it first hand. But maybe it was better this way.

“Thank you so much.” The inspector shook everyone’s hand. “Follow us. We’ll get you through the rush hour traffic. And do not forget to tell me in the days to come how you got on the trail of Winkler.”

18. Cake's Good—All Good!

The day before the probate hearing, Harry Winkler Jr. had admitted that he wanted the collection, so he had forged the letter supposedly from Jacky Knivel. However, Winkler was hasty and revealed the forged letter before he knew of Knivel's will. So when the will came up, he had to continue his game but he knew that his chances of getting the collection were slim.

Judging from the letters in the box found by Jupiter, Knivel worked together at the circus with Mary's grandmother, the violinist. They were very good friends, as the investigators had known earlier. Therefore, Knivel knew of Mary's past, and was sympathetic towards her. Close to his death, he did not have any descendants or relatives, which was probably why he named Mary as the heiress. That got Winkler furious.

Since the collection was last officially examined more than a year ago, everyone had assumed that it was still at Sacramento. So logically, to retrieve it, one would go to Sacramento first, failing which, they would have figured out that it could be at Knivel's other house in Carmel.

So Winkler came up with a crafty plan. He arranged for Walter de Maria and Pipo to break into Knivel's Sacramento house and move the collection to Carmel.

The reason was that there were only two likely outcomes. If Winkler was awarded the collection, he would have suggested that Knivel moved the collection before he died, as correctly deduced by Pete. He would then retrieve the collection from Carmel, and no one would be any the wiser.

Had Mary won, by the time she discovered the collection missing from Sacramento, Knivel would have removed it from Carmel.

After Winkler's admission, there was no contest at the probate hearing. Mary was awarded the entire collection.

It was almost a week after the hearing. With Knivel's letter box in his hand, Jupiter stood between the trimmed box trees again. "Come on, now," he urged the others. "We're already late."

Bob, Pete, Kelly, Lys and Elizabeth came up the gravel road. Alma Kubinsky had invited them all for coffee and cake, and to thank them for the unusual family reunion. The six had dressed up especially well. Even Pete wore a new lilac-spotted shirt instead of one of his beloved T-shirts.

"Great here, huh?" Kelly poked Pete in the side.

Jupiter tugged the heavy bell cord. Mrs Kubinsky opened the door herself.

The Three Investigators courteously greeted her and introduced the girls. Mrs Kubinsky was especially happy to meet Lys, whom she had seen in a movie.

"We heard that Mary..." began Jupiter meekly.

He was interrupted when the artist appeared with Shirley from the terrace into the hallway. The bruises on her face were almost gone. Smiling, she went to Pete. "Where are my yellow roses?"

The Second Investigator took a quick look at Kelly. But she was too busy admiring the house to hear anything.

"Next time," he said quickly. "This time we have something else for you." He pointed to the wooden box in Jupe's hand. "But first, I'd like you to meet Bob and Jupiter. They are very excited to meet you." He grinned triumphantly at the First Investigator who made a small bow, just after Bob did.

"What is it?" Mary asked curiously.

"Jacky Knivel's letters—personal letters," Jupiter confessed, a little embarrassed. "And..." He paused.

"... And?" Mary repeated.

"The letters told us that..." He caught a glimpse of Pete and corrected himself, "... that I've got it wrong... about you."

Mary looked at the First Investigator, not understanding what he meant.

"I have..." Jupiter set in and blushed.

Pete let his friend wriggle for a moment, then he came to his rescue. "Our master detective had you under suspicion for a few days."

"Oh," Mary laughed at Jupiter with a beguiling smile. "How interesting." Her gaze fell on the box in Jupe's hand again.

"And how did you get this?" She pointed to the box. The Three Investigators remained silent, embarrassed. Now Pete blushed, too.

"Oh, I see. I think I understand." With an energetic head movement, the artist threw her black hair behind her shoulder. "So you haven't just broke into my caravan."

She was silent for a few seconds. "Well, yeah. I owe you three a lot. I can't blame you for these... these two special excursions." She turned to Jupiter. "And I don't blame you for thinking that I was a legacy hunter either." Jupiter pulled his shoulders up, crumpled, but didn't make a sound.

"Well, I have something for you as well," Mary said while reaching for a bag and took out something. "This, I believe, belongs to your aunt, Jupiter."

She held out to him a beautiful antique music box of about the size of a small shoebox. The six of them crowded around to examine it. It was rosewood, probably of Swiss design and looked over a hundred years old. The moulded lid had sophisticated string inlay and marquetry. It had an ebonized interior, enclosing a brass cylinder where the tunes are played. It looked very valuable.

"But..." Jupe began.

"Yes, I know of the conditions of Jacky's will." Mary sensed what Jupiter had thought. "But this music box should not be considered part of the collection as it was a loan from your aunt to Jacky. I'd be glad that it goes back to its rightful owner. Please give it back to her. I'm sure she'll treasure it."

With that Jupiter gladly accepted it and thanked her on behalf of Aunt Mathilda.

"I want to go outside. It's so dark here," Shirley interrupted the conversation whining and pulling Pete's arm. "She's right," said Alma Kubinsky.

"We really don't have to stand around in the dark hallway. Hannah will bring coffee, lemonade and fruitcake to the terrace."

The three friends grinned among each other at the word 'fruitcake'.

"I don't think we eat anything like that," Bob said and put Jupe's arm around his shoulder. The three of them looked at each other and started giggling like school kids.

"Get yourselves together," Elizabeth hissed, and Lys gave them blaming looks.

"Sorry," chuckled Jupiter.

Mary di Domenico and Alma Kubinsky looked at him questioningly. “That’s another story,” Pete giggled.

Alma Kubinsky went to the patio door. “Then come into the garden and tell us.”